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CONFESSIONAL BIBLICAL PREACHING IN THE FACE OF WHITENESS:  
CHALLENGING THE PREACHER'S UNDERSTANDING OF WHITE SUPREMACY

by

LAURIE P. FEILLE

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Luther Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

2018



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## ABSTRACT

### *Confessional Biblical Preaching in the Face of Whiteness: Challenging the Preacher's Understanding of White Supremacy*

by

Laurie P. Feille

This thesis addresses the need for preachers to hear the voices of people of color, to hear the “prophets in the streets,” specifically African-Americans, and to have their eyes opened to their own white privilege and role in white supremacy. This thesis argues that this is an important step in preachers finding their confessional voices for preaching before they can begin to help the individual members of those congregations become aware of their individual and collective white privilege and role in white supremacy. With the help of black clergy a “Twin Cities Pilgrimage” was created. This involved learning the stories of locations (sacred places both hopeful and painful), for the black community in the Twin Cities, hearing Scripture at the locations and the white preachers preaching from those same Scriptures the following Sunday.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am thankful for the opportunity that Luther Seminary offers through the Doctor of Ministry in Biblical Preaching program. All of the faculty and staff that I have encountered have been supportive and encouraging. Their dedication to theological education has helped to shape my biblical preaching. I am grateful for Dr. Karoline Lewis, serving as director of the Doctor of Ministry in Biblical Preaching program. Our cohort could not have asked for a better director and teacher. I am also grateful to Dr. Amy E. Marga, for serving as my second reader and I offer thanks for Peter Susag for his editing and formatting skills.

I owe untold thanks to our cohort advisor, Rev. Dr. Richard (Dick) Rehfeldt. Dick sat with us in our classes the past three years. He took time to get to know us and to discover our gifts and abilities. He has been our champion, our editor, a listening ear and our encourager. I am grateful for all that he taught us along the way and for the many ways that he showed us the presence of God.

I am also very thankful for my cohort. I could not have made it through the program or my project without their support and encouragement. Our moments of laughter in the midst of stress were life giving and much appreciated. Thank you to Lee, Ramona, Tricia, Steve, Cindy, Elisabeth, Chris, Richard, Amrela and Lesley. Your friendship is important to me.

The members of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Minneapolis walked this journey with me. I am grateful for their gift of the time to complete this program. They allowed me to be gone for three weeks for three summers and to have the time to complete my assignments. When time came to write the thesis they allowed me to write on Mondays and still keep Friday as my day off. Their feedback on my sermons for this thesis and their undying encouragement has been humbling. I am blessed to serve First Christian.

I also want to thank the full time staff of First Christian Church (DOC), Minneapolis. Rev. Dan Adolphson and Deb Murphy graciously stepped in over the past three years to make sure ministries happened when I was overwhelmed with my studies. They have believed in my thesis from the beginning and whenever doubt crept in they were the voice of encouragement and cheered me on. I will forever be grateful that we are colleagues.

The two clergy who participated in this project with me (Clergy 1 and Clergy 2) enhanced my thesis. They gave of their time and they risked being vulnerable in confronting their own roles in white supremacy. They also became vulnerable by sharing their sermons with me for this thesis. I am in awe of their willingness to participate and their honesty throughout the project. We all grew in our preaching and in our friendships with one another. I am honored to call them my colleagues.

My biggest thank you is for Rev. Danny Givens. The project for my thesis would not have happened without him. We designed the project while sitting at a coffee shop dreaming of how white clergy could begin to address their own role in white supremacy. He was willing to enter into this venture with me without knowing who all would

participate and how it would turn out. I am thankful for the amount of trust Rev. Givens placed in me. His gift of time and of allowing us to enter sacred spaces for the African American community is priceless. I have learned so much from Rev. Givens and I look forward to future ventures together. Thank you, Rev. Givens for your friendship, honesty, integrity and your gift of grace.

Last but not least, I am thankful for my spouse, Rev. Dr. Bryan G. Feille. He stood by me every step of the way. He never complained about the time I needed to devote to my studies, my project or the writing of this thesis. He graciously served as my sounding board and my sanity. He encouraged me daily and believed in my thesis and me.



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION, PROBLEM, JUSTIFICATION AND RATIONALE

There is a deep-seated loathing of blackness and black people in this country. It is at best a disease, at worst a demonic affliction, perhaps both. It feels overwhelming but we are neither helpless nor hopeless.<sup>1</sup>

As I began research on my thesis my initial thoughts focused on preachers opening the ears of the white hearers of sermons to the reality of white privilege and white supremacy. In the preaching of the sermon then, the preacher would hopefully create space for hearts to be transformed.

As I shared my topic with white colleagues from my own denomination as well as different denominations, I realized that they as preachers were not aware of their own white privilege. Even though I want to believe that I am aware of my own white privilege I am not able to see all of the levels of that privilege without listening to the voices of our sisters and brothers of color. I contend and aim to show that although many of us believe we are we are preaching prophetically about racism, we cannot do so unless we are confessional in preaching our role in white supremacy. I am not using the term confessional preaching in the sense of using historic confessions of faith. Rather, I understand confessional preaching as the preacher confessing her own role in white supremacy and systemic racism.

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<sup>1</sup> Wil Gafney, "Exorcising America's Murderous Demons," *Wil Gafney* (blog), accessed October 9, 2017, <http://www.wilgafney.com/2017/06/18/exercising-americas-murderous-demons/>.

Lenora Tubbs Tisdale, in *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach*, identifies “seven hallmarks of prophetic preaching.”<sup>2</sup> The seventh hallmark is

prophetic proclamation requires of the preacher a heart that breaks with the things that break God’s heart; a passion for justice in the world; the imagination, conviction, and courage to speak words from God; humility and honesty in the preaching moment; and a strong reliance on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

I now believe that the first step toward responsible biblical preaching around this issue of confessional preaching and white supremacy is the transformation of the preacher’s heart and the opening of the preacher’s eyes. This requires as Tisdale states, “a heart that breaks with the things that break God’s heart.”<sup>4</sup> Tisdale reminds us that as preachers we need to be “intimately connected with God, with God’s world, and with God’s people.”<sup>5</sup> While Tisdale views “a heart that breaks” as important for prophetic preaching, I believe it is also important for making confessional preaching prophetic.

There are denominational programs available through which pastors can lead their congregational members to help them “see” their white privilege and their role in white supremacy.<sup>6</sup> I have colleagues, white colleagues, who are leading their congregations

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<sup>2</sup> Lenora Tubbs Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 9.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>6</sup> For examples of denominational programs see *White Privilege: Let’s Talk-A Resource for Transformational Dialogue*, Traci Blackmon, John C. Dorhauer, Da Vita D. McCallister, John Paddock and Stephen G. Ray, Jr., United Church of Christ, 2014, <http://privilege.uccpages.org>; *Cracking the Shell of Whiteness*, Sheryl Bowman, Doug Bowen-Bailey, Dick Dolezal, Cindy Donner, Ann Mahoney, Ellen O’Neill and Lyn Clark Pegg, DigiTerp Communications, 2012, <http://digiterp.com/new/community/cracking>; *Seeing the Face of God In Each Other: The Antiracism Training Manual of the Episcopal Church*, Jayne Jones Oasin, Barbara Culmer-Illaw and Lou Schoen, eds., 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Diversity, Social and Environmental Ministries Team in the Mission Department of the

through such programs. It is the preacher or pastors of the church who typically lead congregations through studies, books and workshops so that members of the church can begin to understand the depths of white privilege.

While I am grateful to have colleagues who are trying to open the eyes of the members of their congregation to an understanding of white privilege, it was an interaction with one of my white clergy colleagues that made me realize that we preachers have our own work to do first. Tisdale also has caused me to realize the “bubble” that many of my colleagues and I live in when we engage in biblical study. Why do only a few colleagues create lectionary groups that are intentionally diverse? How many preachers are reading, listening to or watching sermons from our sisters and brothers of color? When was the last time a white preacher asked a colleague of color to help her hear the text from the world outside of the lens of white privilege? While many of my colleagues will say that they are not racist, I believe that if we only view Scripture and the world through a white lens then the language and stories we share in our sermons perpetuate what Stuart Hall calls *inferential racism*.<sup>7</sup> Hall’s definition of *inferential racism* as distinguished from *overt racism* refers to

those apparently naturalized representations of events and situations relating to race, whether “factual” or “fictional,” which have racist premises and propositions inscribed in them as a set of *unquestioned assumptions*.<sup>8</sup>

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Episcopal Church Center, 2011; and *Examining Whiteness: An Anti-Racism Curriculum*, William Gardner, Boston, MA: Unitarian Universalist, 2008, <https://www.uua.org/racial-justice/curricula/whiteness>;

<sup>7</sup> Stuart Hall, “The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media,” in *Race and Class in Media: A Text-Reader*, ed. Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995), 20.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

When preachers do not allow or consider the voices of people of color to enter our understanding of Scripture or the world, we are participating in *inferential racism* by perpetuating a white lens view and understanding of both Scripture and the world. However, when the relationships are formed with preachers of color and we begin to see the world through lenses other than our own, then I believe our preaching will be transformed. Thus it is imperative that our eyes are opened to the power of the words that we speak in our sermons.

Rachel Hackenberg, in her blog post “Dear White Preachers, Take Off Your Prophet’s Mantle,” addresses how white preachers have not addressed their own whiteness:

That sermon you just preached on race to your predominantly white congregation was not prophetic. Admonishing America’s racist soul—or, taking the more pastoral approach, affirming God’s love for all people/the least of these/the poor & oppressed—in your sermons for two Sundays in a row is not prophetic. Your invitation to church folks to gather for a vigil in prayerful solidarity with the #BlackLivesMatter movement is not prophetic. Naming directly the racism that you hear from congregants on Facebook or in person is not prophetic.<sup>9</sup>

Hackenberg understands that a prophetic word in this day and time is not found in the pulpits of our white churches. Instead the “prophets are in the streets.”

The kingdom of God for which the true prophets are now in the streets crying out, demanding, will upend our white world no matter how much we believe ourselves to be allies. Perhaps we can participate in that coming kingdom, but we do so in a confessional posture . . . not a prophetic stance.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Rachel G. Hackenberg, “Dear White Preacher, Take Off Your Prophet’s Mantle” *Rachel G. Hackenberg Blog*, December 11, 2014, <http://rachelhackenberg.com/dear-white-preachers-take-off-your-prophets-mantel/>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

This thesis will address the need for preachers to hear the voices of people of color, to hear the “prophets in the streets,” specifically African-Americans, and to have their eyes opened to their own white privilege and role in white supremacy. This is an important step in preachers finding their confessional voices so they can begin to help their congregations be aware of their individual and collective white privilege and role in white supremacy. I will approach this issue with an Action/Reflection Model involving black and white clergy based on pilgrimages to places such as Selma, Alabama. The black clergy will create a “Twin Cities Pilgrimage” by selecting important places, sacred places for good and bad, for the black community in the Twin Cities. These places will be where the black and white clergy will meet and begin the journey to confessional preaching.

### **Justification and Rationale**

On July 2016, in Falcon Heights, Minnesota, a police officer with the city of St. Anthony (acquitted of all charges), murdered Philando Castile, after pulling him over for a broken tail light.<sup>11</sup> White clergy from a variety of faith traditions gathered along with black leaders and clergy at Governor Mark Dayton’s mansion in St. Paul, Minnesota. Many of the white clergy who gathered were also present at the 4<sup>th</sup> precinct of the Minneapolis Police Department during the months following the Minneapolis police shooting and killing of Jamar Clark. The Hennepin County District Attorney did not bring charges against the two officers involved.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Chao Xiong, “Hours after Officer Yanez is Found Not Guilty in Fatal Shooting of Philando Castile, Marchers Close I-94,” *Star Tribune*, June 17, 2017, <http://www.startribune.com/fifth-day-of-jury-deliberations-underway-in-yanez-trial/428862473/#1>.

<sup>12</sup> Erin Golden, Paul Walsh and David Chanen, “No Charges Against Minneapolis Police Officers in Jamar Clark shooting,” *Star Tribune*, March 31, 2016, <http://www.startribune.com/no-charges-against-police-in-jamar-clark-shooting-death/373979481/#1>.

That same week the two-year-old cousin of the liaison between the Twin Cities Black Lives Matter and the Black Clergy United for Change, Rev. Danny Givens, was shot and killed in a drive by shooting. The following week Rev. Givens sent out an email to a group of white clergy who had been at the protests and rallies in response to the killings of Jamar Clark and Philando Castile, inviting us white clergy to the funeral and sharing in the email that he would be officiating at his cousin's service. On the day of the funeral only three white clergy out of twenty-six of the white clergy on the email list attended the funeral. I mentioned this to one of my white clergy colleagues and she responded, "So many of the white clergy are burned out from the protests and rallies." Her comment opened my eyes to how far our white privilege extends. Our black clergy colleagues did not (and do not) have the privilege to "be burned out." Their very lives depend upon speaking out against white supremacy on a very regular basis.

This experience brought to life for me my experiences of growing up in Mississippi. I grew up in a state that was filled with racism, and yet I never heard a word about racism in church or in school. As far as I knew everyone got along, and Hattiesburg, Mississippi, was the greatest place in the world to live. When I was in my mid-thirties while living in Texas, I began to learn the truth of my hometown. While I never saw the Ku Klux Klan in Hattiesburg, the members of this group were actively carrying out hate crimes against blacks in Hattiesburg while I was living there.

A house was firebombed in Hattiesburg, in 1966. The owner of the house, Vernon Dahmer, had opened his home to house two staff members of the Student Nonviolent



Coordinating Committee. Mr. Dahmer was killed in the firebombing.<sup>13</sup> I was eight years old and did not learn of this event until I was thirty-five years old. There were other events of harassment and violence toward the black citizens of Hattiesburg, and during that very time I was attending school with the children of the adults who were being targeted. In 1964, white men in Hattiesburg beat a Rabbi, from Cleveland, Ohio, and two civil rights workers as they walked with two African Americans.<sup>14</sup> One is hard pressed to find a newspaper article in the Hattiesburg newspaper regarding the participation of local white clergy in the civil rights movement. Searching the archives of the New York Times yields articles of white clergy from outside the South including a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) pastor from Colorado, participating in demonstrations regarding voting drives.<sup>15</sup>

Why did I not know of these acts of hatred? Why did my church, Central Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) or my schoolteachers not talk with the children about the hatred in our community? If my pastor participated in working for justice, why is there no record of his work? If the church leaders or school administration believed eight year olds were too young for such discussions, then why were acts of hatred never discussed as I grew older and entered high school?

The answer to the question of why the school curriculum never included the Civil Rights movement was discovered and published in 1994 by a journalist from New York:

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<sup>13</sup> Bob M. Tusa, "Historic Sites of the Civil Rights Movement in Hattiesburg, Mississippi," University of Southern Mississippi-McCain Library and Archives, 1999, <http://www.lib.usm.edu/legacy/archives/crsitdoc.htm>

<sup>14</sup> David Halberstam, "Rabbi and 2 Rights Aides Attacked in Mississippi," *New York Times*, July 11, 1964, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1964/07/11/118670567.html?pageNumber=22>.

<sup>15</sup> Associated Press, "White Minister Arrested in Mississippi Vote Drive," *New York Times*, January 29, 1964, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1964/01/29/97166109.html>.

The state's education establishment had willfully turned away from a critical look at the recent past, so white Mississippi high school students were sometimes ignorant about their state's true history. My own contemporaries in Mississippi, people born around 1960, often seemed shocked to learn of events that had been on the front pages of national newspapers thirty years before.<sup>16</sup>

I was born in 1958. We did not study Civil Rights in elementary, junior high or high school. An organization called the Citizen's Council, as well as the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission removed any mention of Civil Rights from our textbooks. They also controlled what television news the citizens of Mississippi received. I experienced shock and despair when in my thirties, I learned this part of the history of my State and my hometown.

The answer to the question of why the church never discussed the racial bigotry and violence in our community has not been found. Was it a safety issue for the preachers? That is what I want to believe, for to believe that preachers proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ believed it was right to remain silent during this time is a thought too painful to bear.

The silence of the churches and the schools and yes, my own family, allowed me to grow up with a distorted view of what life was like for my black school friends. To discover, at thirty-five years old, that the town in which I learned that we are to love as God loves us was living out another narrative was devastating. To discover that my church had remained silent was painful and made me doubt whether my Sunday school teachers and my pastor really believed the love of God for all they so readily proclaimed.

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<sup>16</sup> Adam Nossiter, *Of Long Memory: Mississippi and the Murder of Medgar Evers* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1994), 14.

The churches I have served as a pastor have been predominantly white. The church that I now serve, First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Minneapolis, is a white church. The Twin Cities area is predominantly white and for that reason “whiteness” is the predominate narrative. As a pastor, I cannot allow the children of our congregation to grow up not knowing the truth of white supremacy in our city. As a pastor, I believe I have a responsibility to place white supremacy into our understanding of God’s love for all people. To bring integrity to any discussion of white supremacy I need to address my own whiteness. As Rachel Hackenberg reminds us, I need to be confessional in my teaching and my preaching.

Confessional preaching and teaching regarding white supremacy is of importance to the wider Christian community beyond First Christian Church, Minneapolis. This is a systemic issue that permeates all of our communities in the United States of America. From Minneapolis to Charlottesville, Virginia to St. Louis, Missouri to Charlotte, North Carolina our black sisters and brothers of all faiths and of no faith are crying out for justice. As preachers in different denominations in different parts of the country we have a responsibility to help the members of our congregations see white supremacy for what it is. To do this, we first must have our own eyes opened.

In summary, the reader may sense the large amount of space given to autobiographical accounts and insights. The writer has done this to show just how deeply engrained the topic of white supremacy is in individual lives. By relating what I have done above, I believe there are others who may quickly identify with the experiences shared.

Also, in summary, as pastors and preachers we have a responsibility to open our eyes to our own role in inferential racism, systemic racism and white supremacy for our own selves as well as for the members of our congregations. We have black sisters and brothers who are dying on the streets of our cities. From watching television and reading articles in print and on the internet it appears to countless persons that our justice system is not working on behalf of the victims. We have reached a point in our country where people are crying out for justice. Thus I believe it is time, as Tisdale says, that our heart “breaks with the things that break God’s heart.”<sup>17</sup> To do that I believe we must listen to our sisters and brothers of color and become confessional in our preaching.

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<sup>17</sup> Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching*, 10.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Until we can see the cross and the lynching tree together, until we can identify Christ with a “recrucified” black body hanging from a lynching tree, there can be no genuine understanding of Christian identity in America, and no deliverance from the brutal legacy of slavery and white supremacy.<sup>1</sup>

In Genesis 1:26-27, God said “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness . . .” and “So God created humankind in his (God’s) image, in the image of God, he (God) created them; male and female he (God) created them.” From the beginning we are, as humans, created in God’s image. The narrative does not exclude anyone who is human from being created in the image of God. If we believe that God created humans then from this text we must also believe that God created all humans and that all humans are created in the image of God.

In the Gospel of Matthew 22:36-40, a lawyer asks Jesus “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”<sup>2</sup> In the Gospel of Mark 12:28-34, a scribe asks Jesus “Which commandment is the first of all?” In the Gospel of Luke 10:25-28, a lawyer asks Jesus “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” In Matthew and Mark, Jesus

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<sup>1</sup>James H. Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011), Kindle E-Book, loc.196.

<sup>2</sup> All Scripture quotations will be from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.

answers both questions with words from the Torah with a few variations between the two Gospels: “You shall Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” Jesus then shares that there is a second commandment and that is to “love neighbor as self.” In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus asks the lawyer “what is written in the law?” And it is the lawyer who responds (with the “second commandment”) “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” In Luke’s recording of this response by the lawyer, Jesus responds, “do this and you shall live (10:28).”

In all three Gospels Jesus says that part of the *shema* in Deuteronomy and a code for ethical relationships from Leviticus are the most important laws and commandments to keep.<sup>3</sup> There is nothing more that we need to do to live as Jesus calls us to live. If we love God with every part of our being, and we love our neighbors as we would love ourselves, then the dignity and equality that all people deserve will come naturally through the very way we live out this doable law command.

The problem (as I see it) is that many do not live this way, and that it is hard to live this way. We live in a world where, from this writer’s view, the norm appears to demonize or look down upon anyone who thinks differently, looks differently, lives differently and speaks differently. Looking back over our history as a country there is

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<sup>3</sup> The *shema* is a prayer that is to be said twice daily (morning and night) found in the Torah in Deuteronomy 6:4-9. The opening word of the prayer is “Hear” which transliterated from Hebrew is *shema*. This prayer according to the text is to be said when “you lie down” and “when you rise up.” Deuteronomy 6:4 is the part of the *shema* that Jesus says is greatest or first commandment in Matthew and Mark. It is also his answer for “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” in Luke. The code for ethical relationships found in Leviticus 19:18 is part of the Holiness Code. To be “holy” means that “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.” In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus says this is the “second commandment.”

incident after incident of white people demonizing and looking down upon African-Americans as evidenced by life and the action/non-action of my hometown people.

In seminary at Brite Divinity School, during our supervised year, we were required to state our theological and/or Christological basis for ministry. This call to “love God” and “love neighbor as self” that is found in the Synoptic Gospels, was my basis for ministry over twenty years ago. Today it still defines who I am as a pastor and my understanding of the role of the church in the world. White supremacy has no theological or Christological warrant in a world where Jesus calls us to “love God” and “love neighbor as self.” In fact, white supremacy is a sin.

If, as preachers, we believe that white supremacy is a sin then we are called not only as pastor/preachers but also as present day prophets. Rabbi Abraham J. Heschel understands that a prophet is “a partner, an associate of God” not just a “mouthpiece.”<sup>4</sup> This is an important distinction to understand the depth of emotion, of pathos, that a prophet was called to experience. For Rabbi Heschel, “Emotional detachment would be understandable only if there were a command which required the suppression of emotion, forbidding one to serve God ‘with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might.’”<sup>5</sup> Instead we are called to serve with every part of our being.

According to Rabbi Heschel, “the fundamental experience of the prophet is a fellowship with the feelings of God, a *sympathy with the divine pathos* . . .”<sup>6</sup> Or as he so passionately wrote, “The prophet hears God’s voice and feels [sic] God’s heart.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Abraham, J. Heschel, *The Prophets: An Introduction*, Vol. 1 (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1962), 25.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 26. Emphasis theirs.

I believe that Heschel's understanding of the role of prophet informs Tisdale's understanding; namely that one hallmark of prophetic preaching today is "a heart that breaks with the things that break God's heart."<sup>8</sup> It is difficult as white preachers who are by default products of white supremacy to always hear or feel "the things that break God's heart." We know the scriptures and we preach good sermons from the above texts. Yet, we do this viewing of Scripture and preaching from a position of listening to and living within a white narrative. I believe that we preachers have to hear the voices of our sisters and brothers of color to begin to understand the depth of the pathos of God.

James W. Perkinson, reminds us that the "Judeo-Christian tradition is a tradition that began in the cry of Exodus slaves" and "found a pragmatic expression of those premises in one who championed the cause of the oppressed in his own day."<sup>9</sup> In other words our Judeo-Christian tradition is a tradition "of reading 'God' present in the quietest moan of the marginalized, the slightest sigh of the suppressed, even the tiniest groan emerging from the ground itself."<sup>10</sup> Perkinson's words of "reading God" resonate with the description Tisdale gives having "a heart that breaks with the things that break God's heart."<sup>11</sup>

To do what Tisdale, Heschel and Perkinson suggest, we preachers must hear outside of the white narrative what it means to be created in the image of God and to love

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching*, 10.

<sup>9</sup> James W. Perkinson, *White Theology: Outing Supremacy in Modernity*, 1<sup>st</sup> Ed., Black Religion/Womanist Thought/Social Justice (New York: NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 17.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching*, 10.



God and neighbor. We must hear outside of the white narrative because the white narrative has created the image of a white God and a white Jesus that impacts one's understanding of being created in the image of God.

In Ibram X. Kendi's book, *Stamped From The Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, he discusses the establishment of the "American Bible Society, The American Sunday School Union, and the American Tract Society" in the 1820's.<sup>12</sup> All of these organizations relied heavily on the printing press to get their message across. Their message was "a strong, unified, Jesus-centered national identity."<sup>13</sup> Kendi says

Protestant organizations started mass-producing, mass-marketing, and mass-distributing images of Jesus, who was always depicted as White. Protestants saw all the aspirations of the new American identity in the White Jesus—a racist idea that proved to be in their cultural self-interest.<sup>14</sup>

This understanding of a "white Jesus" led to the understanding that God must be white which led to, as Kendi says, "unconsciously and consciously" making connections "between the White God the Father, his White son Jesus, and the power and perfection of White people."<sup>15</sup> If God is white then logic could lead to being created in God's image meaning created white and that people of color are not created in the image of God. This is overt and *inferential racism*.

Herein is the danger of *inferential racism* entering our theological and Christological understandings and beliefs. Later in his book Kendi addresses Reverend

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<sup>12</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: NY: Nation Books, 2016), 153.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Henry Ward Beecher's attempt to "reunite White northerners and southerners through Christian Whiteness," in his "biography of Jesus," *The Life of Jesus, the Christ*, written in 1871.<sup>16</sup> In the book Beecher writes, "There is absolutely nothing to determine the personal appearance of Jesus."<sup>17</sup> Kendi goes on to say

And yet Beecher included in the book five depictions of the perfect God-man named Jesus, and they all depicted a White man. Henry Ward Beecher gave White Americans a model for embedding Whiteness into their religious worldview of Jesus Christ without ever saying so out loud . . .<sup>18</sup>

A little less than one hundred years later the debate over the color of God and Jesus continued. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in a sermon from 1965, delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia reminds the congregation of the colors of God.<sup>19</sup> King says

There are no gradations in the image of God. Every man from a treble white to a bass black is significant on God's keyboard, precisely because every man is made in the image of God.<sup>20</sup>

In a sermon draft on "Being a Good Neighbor," based on Luke 10:25-37, (preached sometime between 1962-1963) King shares the dangers of limiting ones

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 251-252.

<sup>19</sup> Kendi might take exception to this quote from King's sermon. In *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, page 368, Kendi shares a story from the time King wrote a column in *Ebony* magazine titled "Advice for the Living." A reader sent a letter asking "Why did God make Jesus white, when the majority of peoples in the world are non-white?" King's response to this question is that Jesus "would have been no more significant if His skin had been black. . . . He is no less significant because his skin was white." The reader was upset by King's answer and sent another letter asking, "I believe as you do, that skin color shouldn't be important, but I don't believe Jesus was white. . . . What is the basis for your assumption that he was?" Kendi shares that King did not respond and that this assumption only has a basis in "racist ideas." This is a powerful example of the depths of *inferential racism*.

<sup>20</sup> Clayborne Carson and Peter Holloran, eds., *A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 1998), 35.

“neighborly concern” to one’s race, tribe, class or nation.<sup>21</sup> What will happen if white people only read the story of the Good Samaritan through the lens of white supremacy?

King says

If a white man is concerned only about his race, he will not be interested in what happens to the Negro. He will notice the Negro being robbed of his personhood, stripped of his sense of dignity, beaten by [*sic*] hooded perpetrator of violence and left dying on some wayside road, and yet he will pass by on the other side.<sup>22</sup>

When a “hooded perpetrator of violence” beats the Samaritan, the story is then heard through the ears of those who have been the victims of the violence that comes from the sin of systemic white supremacy. I can imagine that if King were to preach this sermon today his imagery would include the black man being shot to death in his car at a traffic stop instead of beaten by a “hooded perpetrator of violence.”

Today the New Poor People’s Campaign, led by The Rev. Dr. William Barber, a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) pastor, has revived Dr. King’s call to address systemic racism and poverty. On Monday, December 4, 2017, 50 years to the day after King called for the original Poor People’s Campaign, Dr. Barber and clergy, representing several denominations and faiths, gathered in Washington, D.C., to deliver a letter to Mitch McConnell, Majority Leader of the Senate of the United States of America. The letter informed the Majority Leader that the Poor People’s Campaign is calling for senators to care for the poor in the laws that they pass.

At the press conference before the letter was delivered, The Rev. Dr. Teresa Hord Owens, General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of

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<sup>21</sup>Martin Luther King, Jr., “Draft of Chapter III, ‘On Being a Good Neighbor,’” The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, n.d., The King Papers. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/draft-chapter-iii-being-good-neighbor> accessed December 4, 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Christ) and the first African American General Minister and President, shared these words

We stand here . . . because of God and who God has called us to be. We are called to love God but we can't do that unless we are also loving our neighbor as ourselves.<sup>23</sup>

This is an important statement for the General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to make and an important message to send. Our history includes Alexander Campbell, one of founders of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), writing, “as much as I have sympathy for a black man I love the white man more.”<sup>24</sup>

In the *Millennial Harbinger*, the journal for the denomination at that time, Campbell wrote an article entitled “Our Position to American Slavery.”<sup>25</sup> He wrote several articles with this title as it appears that “Our Position” changed over time. Campbell was accused at times of being an abolitionist and at other times of being pro-slavery. The changing of his position on slavery does not take a course that shows a change over time. Instead Campbell held to scriptural authority and the scriptures address the relationship between a “master and a slave.”<sup>26</sup> While Campbell did not believe that slavery was economically or socially correct, he could not condemn it as

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<sup>23</sup> Teresa Hord Owens, Speech at New Poor People's Campaign Press Conference, Facebook video 53:53, videoed on December 4, 2017, posted by Repairers of the Breach, December 4, 2017, [https://www.facebook.com/brepairers/videos/1532936543410163/?hc\\_](https://www.facebook.com/brepairers/videos/1532936543410163/?hc_)

<sup>24</sup> William Edward Tucker and Lester G. McAllister, *Journey in Faith: A History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1975), 193.

<sup>25</sup> Alexander Campbell, “Our Position to American Slavery,” *Millennial Harbinger*, series 3, volume 2 (Bethany, WV: W. K. Pendleton, 1845), 232-236.

<sup>26</sup> Harold L. Lunger, *The Political Ethics of Alexander Campbell* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1954), 208.

immoral.<sup>27</sup> Campbell appears to have swayed one way or the other depending on external factors. Lunger states that, “Rather, he was always concerned primarily with the effects of the system upon the slaveholder and his family, or upon the well-being of society in general, the unity of the church, or order in the state.”<sup>28</sup>

If Campbell feared that there would be a split between the churches in the North and the churches in the South he would claim that we could not tell people what to do with their slaves. When he was leaning toward being an abolitionist he would expound his plan for the colonization of the slaves

Three groups he would colonize by means of federal funds—those already free, slaves whom their masters might be induced to emancipate, and “*female slaves of certain ages*” who might be purchased “from those who would not emancipate.”<sup>29</sup>

Depending on which way he was leaning members of the churches would rise up against him depending on where they stood on the issue of slavery. In the end, Campbell was more concerned over the growth of the church than in the sin of slavery. Lunger observes, “The most striking fact about his treatment of the slavery issue is that he almost never dealt with the subject from the point of view of its effects upon the slaves.”<sup>30</sup> Or maybe more striking is the fact that Campbell “almost never looked at the institution from the point of view of the slave.”<sup>31</sup>

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) comes from the roots of the Restoration Movement. We were founded in 1832 in Lexington, Kentucky with a

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 232.

handshake between Alexander Campbell and Barton W. Stone. We came to life on the soil of the United States of America and pride ourselves on being a church that was part of the frontier. We have churches on soil that belonged to our indigenous sisters and brothers and we participated in slavery. In 2017, we elected our first person of color as our General Minister and President and the day she stood with Rev. Dr. William Barber in Washington, D.C. and declared that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) stands there because of “God . . . and who God calls us to be” was a turn toward justice for our denomination. It is time that we care more about people than the institutions we have created.

If we are here because of God, who is this God? This God is the creator of all things including creating humans in God’s own image. We cannot love God without loving neighbor. The prophets show us when our neighbor is hurting, suffering or oppressed it a hurts, or as Tisdale says it also “breaks” the heart of God. This is the God whom Jesus calls us to love with every part of our being and calls us to be a people who love our neighbor as our selves.

As Christian preachers we are called to follow Jesus the Christ, the One who proclaimed the year of God’s favor in the Gospel of Luke

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour. Luke 4:18-19

Over the centuries white preachers have perpetuated a white narrative in our sermons as we white preachers view the world through a white lens. It appears (from the material referenced above) that main stream Christianity in the United States has been a leading purveyor of a white God and a white Jesus. This understanding of the image of

God and the image of Jesus has done damage to the spiritual life of African Americans and also of Whites. If we preachers follow the call of Jesus then we are called to confessional preaching and to preach with a different lens so as to inspire others to work with us so that the “oppressed go free.”

In summary, if as preachers we believe that all are created in the image of God and believe that loving God with every part of our being and loving neighbor as self are the greatest commandments, as Jesus said, then white supremacy is a sin. It is a sin that has been perpetuated through an overt and inferential racism in Christianity in the United States of America. It is the sin of the image of God as only white which leads to the image of Jesus having to be white. This can lead to the conclusion that white skin means superiority due to being the same as the *only* image of God. If skin of a color other than white is not considered the same as the image of God then loving neighbor as self takes a back seat to our own self-interest. I believe white preachers have a responsibility to preach a different message. We are called to preach a message that names overt and inferential racism and that brings the voices of people of color into our theological and Christological discussions. After all, we are all humans created in the image of God.

## CHAPTER THREE

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Why is it that Christianity seems impotent to deal radically, and therefore effectively, with the issues of discrimination and injustice on the basis of race, religion and national origin? Is this impotency due to a betrayal of the genius of the religion, or is it due to a basic weakness in the religion itself?<sup>1</sup>

In my research I discovered many resources on leading congregations through studies on “whiteness.” Some denominations have developed their own curricula for congregational use. The Religious Institute has a web page dedicated to these resources.<sup>2</sup> There are a variety of books on the subject of racism and white supremacy and it is difficult to keep up with the array of new publications being released.

Jim Wallis’ New York Times Bestseller, *America’s Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege and the Bridge to a New America*, is a good book for congregations to read and discuss.<sup>3</sup> He includes an extensive bibliography for congregation members who may be seeking to further their study of white privilege. There is also a study guide that can be purchased to go along with the book.

To help wade through the many publications I found in my research, I focused on literature that specifically addressed preachers and white supremacy or informed a way

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), xix.

<sup>2</sup> “Resources for Responding to Racism, White Supremacy, and Police Violence,” Religious Institute, accessed January 4, 2018, <http://religiousinstitute.org/resources/anti-racism-resources/>

<sup>3</sup> Jim Wallis, *America’s Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege and the Bridge to a New America* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016).



for preachers to address their own white supremacy. While there is literature that discusses how preachers can preach about racism, white supremacy and white privilege there are fewer resources on preachers addressing their own white supremacy before they preach.

I also discovered several Theses and Dissertations that addressed racism and preaching. In these theses, I did not find any proposal for the preacher to address her or his own whiteness prior to preaching, especially in the way that I am proposing.

### **Theses on Racism and Preaching**

In Geoffrey Noel Schoonmaker's PhD dissertation "Preaching About Racism: A Homiletic about Racial Reconciliation" he argues for an "ethical vision of the preaching task."<sup>4</sup> His focus is on "how white evangelical preachers might best preach to white American evangelical congregations about race."<sup>5</sup> In his chapter "An Ethic for Preaching About Race: Re-scripting Racial Reality," Schoonmaker analyzes the "ethical proposals" for preaching by Charles Campbell, Sally Brown, Lucy Rose and John McClure.<sup>6</sup> All four of the above are white. While the proposals Schoonmaker examines by Brown and Rose are insightful, Schoonmaker's examination of the proposals by Campbell and McClure inform this thesis.

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<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Noel Schoonmakers "Preaching about Racism: A Homiletic about Racial Reconciliation" (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 2012), 150.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., xv.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 155.

Schoonmaker focuses on Campbell's argument in *The Word Before The Powers: An Ethic of Preaching*,<sup>7</sup> that

the monstrous homiletical heresy of recent years is the assumption that the whole drama of the gospel takes place between God and human beings. The aggressiveness of the powers and the moral captivity of people have received inadequate attention.<sup>8</sup>

Schoonmaker believes that Campbell has revealed in his "heresy" argument "a problem in *white* homiletics."<sup>9</sup> The problem is that "inattention to the powers in white homiletics results partly from white privilege that has bred complacency about the powers."<sup>10</sup> Schoonmaker proposes "white evangelical preachers keep the powers constantly on their radar, especially the powers of unconscious racism and white privilege."<sup>11</sup>

Based on his analysis of John McClure's book *Other-wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics*,<sup>12</sup> Schoonmaker shares that McClure challenges preachers "to make a mutual speaking-listening, face-to-face encounter with others an essential aspect of the preaching process."<sup>13</sup> McClure "advocates" the "face-to-face" encounters "to make preachers constantly aware of the irreducible difference between

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<sup>7</sup> Charles L. Campbell, *The Word Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>12</sup> John McClure, *Other-Wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Schoonmaker, *Preaching about Racism*, 179-180.

their experiences and the experiences of others.”<sup>14</sup> Responding to McClure’s “challenge” Schoonmaker proposes “white evangelical preachers seek face-to-face conversations with people of color that can inform their preaching ministry, particularly their preaching about race.”<sup>15</sup> Based on McClure’s work Schoonmaker contends that

. . . preaching about race involves nurturing genealogical countermemory, facilitating embodied encounters with people of color, and fostering collaborative conversations toward a shared commitment to providing racial reparations.<sup>16</sup>

Schoonmaker has adapted Campbell’s and McClure’s ethical proposals for preaching for his proposal for preaching about race. The way in which he has adapted their proposals is important for this thesis. He highlights the importance of being made aware of *inferential* racism and the need for personal encounters to hear alternative narratives.

John Dorhauer’s DMin Thesis, “The Role of White Clergy in White Power, Privilege and Supremacy in the Missouri Mid-South Conference UCC,” looked at the ways in which white clergy in Missouri viewed their engagement with racism and how often they addressed racism in their newsletter articles. He found that clergy did not address it as often as they believed they did.<sup>17</sup>

Patricia Jones Brainard’s dissertation “White Lies: A Critical Race Study of Power and Privilege” is directed at adult educators. One of the purposes of her study was to determine “what change in behavior occurs” when white people are more aware of

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>17</sup> John Dorhauer, “The Role of White Clergy in White Power, Privilege and Supremacy in the Missouri Mid-South Conference UCC” (DMin Thesis, United Theological Seminary, 2004), i.

their privilege. Her work with Transformative Learning Theory is informative for this thesis. In Transformative Learning Theory “we create our learning from internal sources, our experiences, rather than external sources, for example-books, and build that knowledge rather than have that learning dispensed to us.”<sup>18</sup> This is the type of experience that I am proposing for this thesis.

### **Books That Informed My Thesis**

While there are many studies on the definition of whiteness, there are several books that have informed my research so far as this term will need to be defined: *The Future of Whiteness*, by Linda Alcoff; *White Theology: Outing Supremacy in Modernity*, by James W. Perkinson<sup>19</sup>; and *What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question*<sup>20</sup> (which is addressed later in this chapter) and *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?*, by George Yancy.<sup>21</sup>

Alcoff approaches this term through empirical whiteness, imaginary whiteness and subjective whiteness. Her understanding of empirical whiteness includes an awareness of its background

Whiteness as a consciously articulated category of identity emerged in the modern period, included only certain European ethnic groups, and was linked to an overt ideology of racial biologism, cultural vanguardism, and the legitimization narrative of colonial conquests.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Patricia Jones Brainard, “White Lies: A Critical Race Study of Power and Privilege” (D.Ed. thesis, National Louis University, 2009), 46.

<sup>19</sup> James W. Perkinson, *White Theology: Outing Supremacy in Modernity*, Black Religion/Womanist Thought/Social Justice (New York: Palgrave, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> George Yancy, ed., *What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> George Yancy, *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>22</sup> Linda Martín Alcoff, *The Future of Whiteness* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 76.

Imaginary whiteness, according to Alcoff, refers to

the realm of mythic imagery and the relatively unconscious ways in which people have affective and dispositional attitudes about whiteness—that is, what whiteness stands for, what it means, its imagined genealogy, and how it is qualitatively distinct from other groups.<sup>23</sup>

Subjective whiteness is the “relationship between whiteness and self.”<sup>24</sup> The importance of Alcoff’s understanding of different aspects to whiteness for this thesis is her understanding of the relationship between the three. Instead of examining empirical, imaginary and subjective as separate ideas, Alcoff states

A better understanding of the relationship between the empirical, the imaginary, and the subjective whiteness is that they form a mutually supporting holistic set, rather than a linear line of causation with any one aspect as the determining condition.<sup>25</sup>

We need to look at our understanding of whiteness from every aspect. White supremacy is not signified by one aspect alone.

In the “Introduction” *White Theology*, Perkinson suggests, “undoing the muteness of white ways of being begins with learning to hear the urgency of black anguish.”<sup>26</sup>

Learning to hear is an important step in recognizing our role in white supremacy.

Perkinson believes that

the confrontation of white privilege must be entertained and sustained across the full range of human “being”—the large-scale structures of socioeconomic privilege, the face-to-face politics of personal power, and the more hidden and unconscious logics of cultural habit and erotic embodiment. The central claim of that confrontation focuses on soteriology, arguing that whiteness has functioned

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>26</sup> Perkinson, *White Theology*, 5.

in modernity as a surrogate form of “salvation,” a mythic presumption of wholeness.<sup>27</sup>

Perkinson’s understanding is similar to Alcoff’s but he adds the focus of soteriology that applies to this thesis.

Yancy tries with his students to instill in them a level of humility that will encourage them to be willing to bracket their own voices and allow for the insights of people of color to discern what the students have difficulty seeing. This of course requires vulnerability; it understandably triggers fear.<sup>28</sup> He will remind them “as white, they have internalized forms of white racism that often escape their conscious recognition.”<sup>29</sup> I am proposing that these types of experiences are ways for white preachers to begin to hear Scripture in a different way as they prepare their sermons.

George Lipitz, in *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit From Identity Politics*, quotes Michael Omi as using the term *inferential racism*, which Omi defines as “a system of structured inequality that allows white people to remain self-satisfied and smug about their own innocence” in regard to racism.<sup>30</sup> Omi is actually using a term mentioned earlier that Stuart Hall, a political theorist, uses in making a distinction from *overt racism*.<sup>31</sup> It is this *inferential racism* that I believe preachers need to address so as to transform the lens of white supremacy and whiteness through which we, who are white preachers, read scripture and write sermons.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>28</sup> George Yancy, *Christology and Whiteness*, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> George Lipitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 46.

<sup>31</sup> Hall, “The Whites of Their Eyes,” 20.

Christine Marie Smith believes that “For white Christians and preachers, the beginning point of their pastoral, theological and ethical agenda might be the profound confession that their social structures are sinful to the root.”<sup>32</sup> Smith understands the confession to come within the framework of conversion, “turning *from* one reality and turning *toward* another.”<sup>33</sup> It is in this world of confession and conversion that I believe the white clergy involved in this thesis project will find their voice.

Paul C. Taylor’s essay “Silence and Sympathy: Dewey’s Whiteness,” in *What White Looks Like: African American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question*, opens the door to discussions on what it means to be confessional. In Taylor’s essay he is responding to John Dewey’s “Introduction” to a collection of poems by Claude McKay.<sup>34</sup> At the beginning of the “Introduction” Dewey says that “there is nothing he can say” and “confesses” that the “poet’s depiction of life under white supremacy leaves white men able to express only ‘humiliated sympathy.’”<sup>35</sup> Taylor finds what he perceives here to be “silence” as troubling. If one has nothing to say on the matter of racism or whiteness then Taylor says

Participating in whiteness-as-invisibility means denying that one has a perspective on or stake in the racial terrain. It means rejecting, or ignoring, the burden of identifying—of conceptualizing, of seeing which words apply to—one’s place in a system of social forces and relations. If this is right, then Dewey’s embrace of silence is a way of declining to identity his own perspective, his personal perspective, on racial injustice. He never took up the burden of *explaining*, to

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<sup>32</sup> Christine Marie Smith, *Preaching Justice: Ethnic and Cultural Perspectives* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1998), 125.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>34</sup> Paul C. Taylor, “Silence and Sympathy: Dewey’s Whiteness,” in *What White Looks Like: African American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question*, ed. George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 2004), 227.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

himself and others, his connection to white supremacy. And that is a paradigmatically whitely thing to do.<sup>36</sup>

This similar lack of desire, inability or blindness of the need among preachers to “take up the burden of *explaining*” one’s connection to white supremacy is the driving force behind this Thesis.

In *Who Lynched Willie Earl?: Preaching to Confront Racism*, Will Willimon describes how he struggled with a lynching that happened in his hometown of Greenville, South Carolina in 1947 that he did not learn about until 1964. Though his struggle is similar to mine when it comes to learning truths years later, Willimon did learn that one preacher in town at that time spoke truth about the lynching in his sermon. The week after the shooting at Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston, Willimon contacted former students to find out what they had preached. According to Willimon “All had preached sermons in defiance of America’s refusal to talk about our continuing sin.”<sup>37</sup> Willimon decided to write a book “that tackled the particular challenge that most white preachers face in confronting racism . . .”<sup>38</sup>

Willimon challenges preachers who serve predominately affluent congregations that if we are not

looking for ways to tell people the truth they’ve been avoiding, to worry about someone else’s more pressing economic needs rather than obsess over our own aches and pains, to find something more interesting to do with our lives than be sick-exorcizing demons, liberating people from captivity to America’s original sin-then we haven’t been engaged in pastoral care in Jesus’ name.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>37</sup> Will Willimon, *Who Killed Willie Earl?: Preaching To Confront Racism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017), Kindle Edition, location 113.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 70.



As for the role of this sin in preaching, Willimon is “all for preaching about peace with justice” but for Willimon if we preach without confessing our own role in the sin of racism then all we are doing is moralizing.<sup>40</sup> Preachers are to “identify with, rather than stand above, hearers, pointing at them with smug indignation.”<sup>41</sup> How do we avoid moralistic preaching? Willimon suggests that we

must listen to testimonials by people of color, seeking out honest, mutually beneficial conversation for support, challenge, and understanding, though our deliverance is not the responsibility of people of color.<sup>42</sup>

I agree with Willimon and his understanding of the importance of honest interaction with people of color and the importance of preachers confessing their role in racism through sermons.

### Summary

In summary, while literature specifically on preachers addressing their own role in white supremacy and then confessing their role through sermons is lacking, there is an overwhelming amount of literature on racism and white supremacy. Combing through this literature led me to language to use such as *inferential racism*. This language helped me to pull back the layers of our social structures (or empirical, imaginary and subjective aspects) that Smith calls “sinful to the root.” Taylor calls us to the “burden of explaining” not our role but our “connection” to white supremacy. Schoonmaker’s adaptation of Campbell’s and McClure’s proposals strengthens the importance of the preacher’s

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 117.

recognition of white supremacy. Above all, Willimon affirms my desire to have preachers confess this connection to white supremacy in their preaching after taking on the “burden” of recognizing it in the first place.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The burden of the brutalized is not to comfort the bystander . . . that's not our job, alright? Stop with all that. If you have a critique for the resistance—for our resistance—then you'd better have an established record of critique of our oppression. If you have no interest . . . If you have no interest in equal rights for black people, then do not make suggestions to those who do. Sit down.<sup>1</sup>

To take steps toward recognizing *inferential* racism and building relationships as Willimon, Perkinson and Brainard suggest, as well as recognizing the importance of voices of color being present in the creation of the project, I asked an African American pastor to assist me with this project with me.<sup>2</sup> Rev. Danny Givens, a pastor in St. Paul, Minnesota, agreed to work alongside of me in the creation and implementation of the project.

Rev. Givens and I met at a coffee shop one day and discussed the importance of a project that helps white clergy see their role in white supremacy. Rev. Givens and I agreed that it is not the responsibility of African Americans to “carry the burden” of educating white people about their role white supremacy. Instead, we agreed that face-

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<sup>1</sup> Lily Workneh, “Jesse Williams: ‘Just Because We Are Magic Does Not Mean We’re Not Real,’” *Huffington Post*, June 28, 2016, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/jesse-williams-bet-awards-humanitarian-award\\_us\\_57708cebe4b017b379f65077](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/jesse-williams-bet-awards-humanitarian-award_us_57708cebe4b017b379f65077)

<sup>2</sup> Without the voice of a person of color in the creation of the project, the project would have been created by a white person, which would perpetuate the white narrative lens in the experiences and the outcomes.

to-face interactions and hearing the stories shared by people of color would be our beginning point.

We thought about the life-changing experiences that people have when they go to Selma, Alabama and walk across the Alabama River on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. This bridge is the site of the attack in 1965, by police on Civil Rights protestors who were marching to Montgomery, Alabama. Personally, I know the impact of visiting such places as the King Center in Atlanta. There is something about standing in locations and hearing the story of that location that has the power to change the way we view the world.

We realized that each State in the United States of America has its own story of racism, white privilege and white supremacy. We did not need to go to Alabama to hear stories of injustice against people of color. Instead, we could visit locations in the Twin Cities in Minnesota and hear the stories in our own city that impacted and continue to impact African Americans. Rev. Givens agreed to pick the locations, meet with white clergy and either share the story of the location by himself or he would select people to share the story. In this way we created a “Selma Walk” for the Twin Cities that we called the “Twin Cities Pilgrimage.”

Knowing that preaching needed to be a part of the experience of the white clergy who participated in the project, we decided that Rev. Givens would select a Scripture for each location and the white clergy would have to agree to preach from that particular Scripture on the Sunday that followed the meeting. Our plan included meeting for four consecutive Mondays so that the white clergy would have four consecutive weeks to preach from the Scripture offered and to preach out of the experiences of the meetings.

Our goal was to have four white clergy (including myself) participate in this project during Lent 2017. I asked the white clergy to participate in the project. Rev. Givens determined the number of black clergy that would participate in the project. The white clergy had to agree to the following:

1. Agree to preach for four consecutive weeks on the scripture supplied by the black clergy.
2. Agree to listen and not speak unless asked at the gatherings of the “Twin Cities Pilgrimage” with the black clergy.
3. Agree to meet with black clergy on designated days for four consecutive weeks.
4. Agree to share in their sermons the stories shared by the black clergy only if the black clergy give their permission for the stories to be shared.
5. Turn in copies of manuscripts and videos of their sermons to me for research data for use in the Thesis.
6. Agree to a one-on-one interview with me before the process begins.
7. Agree to a one-on-one interview with me within two weeks after the process is over.

Three white clergy, besides me, agreed to participate in the project. One of the white clergy participants dropped out before the project began due to being over committed. The two clergy who did participate in the entire project are both white and female. One is an Evangelical Lutheran Church of America pastor who is originally from a suburb of Minneapolis and the other is a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) pastor who is originally from Minneapolis. I am female, white and as noted above, originally from Mississippi.

The black clergy whom Rev. Givens asked to participate had to agree to the following

1. Agree to meet with a group of 3-4 white clergy, as asked by Rev. Danny Givens. The meetings will take place on a Monday or Tuesday.
2. At the meeting you will share the story of that particular location and read a scripture that you select.
3. The white clergy will agree to listen and not speak unless asked at the gatherings of the “Twin Cities Pilgrimage.”

4. After each meeting the white clergy will agree to preach from the scripture you select on the following Sunday.

Rev. Givens agreed to

1. Agree to meet with a group of 3-4 white clergy one day a week for four weeks straight. These meetings will take place on a Monday or Tuesday.
2. Select the “Pilgrimage” location for each meeting.
3. Select additional black clergy, as you deem appropriate.
4. Share the story of that location and read a scripture that you select.
5. The white clergy will agree to listen and not speak unless asked at the gatherings of the “Twin Cities Pilgrimage.”
6. After each meeting the white clergy will agree to preach from the scripture you select on the following Sunday.
7. Review the sermons preached by the white clergy and give feedback.

The feedback on the sermons offered by Rev. Givens is critical to the project. He knows what we heard at each location which means he will know what we chose to share and what we chose not to share. If white clergy analyze sermons from white clergy then there is the great chance that perpetuation of the white narrative of any given story will continue.

I used an Action/Reflection Model to see if the sermons by the white clergy involved in the project show that their understanding of whiteness and white supremacy is challenged, informed and transformed. This was assessed through two interviews, reading of the preachers’ sermon manuscripts, and watching videos of the preachers’ sermons as well as the feedback from Rev. Givens.

Before the meetings began I conducted one-on-one interviews with the white clergy. I asked the white clergy to describe their ministry setting, including the percentage of people of color in their setting. I also asked qualitative Autobiographical Reflection questions regarding their understanding of whiteness and the role that understanding has in impacting their sermons.

The qualitative questions included, but were not limited to: “Have you participated in any anti-racism training that included an understanding of white privilege?” “Are there any events/experiences that have informed your understanding of racial conflict and reconciliation?” “Has your understanding of white privilege informed your biblical interpretation? If so, how?” “Have you addressed white privilege in your sermons? If so, how?” “Have there been times when you have been the racial minority? If so how did that challenge or transform you?”

I asked similar questions at the end of the process as well as additional questions concerning the process itself. I searched in the interviews, sermon manuscripts and the videos of the sermons for any changes in their understanding of white supremacy, white privilege and confessional preaching in relation to their changes of understanding.

I examined the manuscripts and videos to see if the white clergy shared any of the stories shared with us by the black clergy. There was the hope that the interviews at the beginning and the end of the process would show a shift in the white clergy’s understanding of white privilege and white supremacy. The one-on-one interview at the end of the process also gave the white clergy a chance to share verbally how the process affected them. I searched for qualitative information regarding the transformation of the white clergy’s understanding of white supremacy.

One hoped-for outcome of this project was the development of relationships between the white clergy and the black clergy that may lead to further joint experiences. Another hoped-for outcome is that the white clergy will begin to see confessional preaching as a form of prophetic preaching. I hope that through the experiences shared with the black clergy that the white clergy’s understanding of white supremacy will

broaden and they will begin to see the *inferential* racism that is in our churches as well as our community. This will be one step toward us white preachers guarding against the perpetuation of white supremacy in our sermons.

### **Twin Cities Pilgrimage**

Rev. Givens sent me a text the day before each meeting with the location and time of our meeting. The “not knowing” the time or where we would meet caused discomfort for the clergy involved in the project. I considered this a good beginning point for us to not have control of our calendars or our time. The meetings were to last for one hour.

#### **First Pilgrimage Location**

Our first stop on the Twin Cities Pilgrimage was the church where Rev. Givens is pastor. It is located in the historic Rondo neighborhood in St. Paul, Minnesota. Rev. Givens offered a prayer and then read Psalm 12 with a focus on verse 5:

Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan, I will rise up, says the Lord; I will place them in the safety for which they long.

Rev. Givens repeated the verse changing “because the poor are despoiled” to “because the poor are robbed.” He then showed a video that documents the destruction of the Rondo neighborhood where 85% of the African American community lived when Interstate 94 was routed right through the middle of this historic black neighborhood, with the destruction beginning in 1956.<sup>3</sup> There were several other proposed routes for the highway that would have followed railroad lines, but the route right through the middle

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<sup>3</sup> Jane McClure, “Rondo Neighborhood,” St. Paul Historical, <http://saintpaulhistorical.com/items/show/160>, last accessed January 18, 2018.



of a historic black neighborhood was chosen. Rev. Givens stated that there was not a voice of color in the discussions of where Interstate 94 would be built.

The destruction of the Rondo neighborhood has had a lasting impact on the black community in St. Paul. One example is housing. The video covered the buying of the houses by the government and the tactics used to offer a buyout lower than the value of the home. With money (less than what home owners should have been offered) in hand residents of Rondo looked to other neighborhoods to purchase homes. Due to housing regulations at the time neighborhoods were allowed to discriminate against African Americans. This meant that many families lost their homes and were not able to buy another home in proximity of the Rondo neighborhood and other neighborhoods in the Twin Cities.

After hearing the Scripture and watching the video we drove around the streets of what used to be the Rondo neighborhood. Rev. Givens pointed out houses where his relatives had lived and where some still live. He shared stories of the stores and businesses that used to occupy neighborhood corners. We drove along the I-94 access road and looked across at the other side of the highway realizing that the expanse of the highway used to hold black businesses, homes and land. Rev. Givens asked us if we had any idea why during protests over the high profile killings of Jamar Clark and Philando Castile, protesters walked onto the highway and shut down I-94. He then pointed to the location where protestors shut down the highway and said that was the heart of the Rondo Neighborhood. We returned to the church, prayed together—and all the while the words of the Psalmist echoed in our ears: “Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan.”

## Second Pilgrimage Location

The second meeting of the Twin Cities Pilgrimage was on the North Side of Minneapolis. The North Side of Minneapolis today is largely comprised of African Americans. We met at an organization that works to bring healthier food into a neighborhood that has not had healthy food choices for decades. Rev. Givens read Genesis 26:17-22:

So Isaac departed from there and camped in the valley of Gerar and settled there. Isaac dug again the wells of water that had been dug in the days of his father Abraham; for the Philistines had stopped them up after the death of Abraham; and he gave them the names that his father had given them. But when Isaac's servants dug in the valley and found there a well of spring water, the herders of Gerar quarreled with Isaac's herders, saying, "The water is ours." So he called the well Esek, because they contended with him. Then they dug another well, and they quarreled over that one also; so he called it Sitnah. He moved from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it; so he called it Rehoboth, saying, "Now the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land."

To understand why the North Side had become a neighborhood that lacks healthy food, Rev. Givens invited a representative of the organization to share about the organization and the history of the North Side. The organization works to help the community learn how to grow and cook healthier foods as well as works with grocery stores on the North Side to encourage them to place fresh produce and other healthier foods on the stores shelves. The North Side has struggled to have good restaurants and grocery stores since the 1960's.

The 1960's were turbulent times in the United States of America as well as in Vietnam. President Kennedy was assassinated. Senator Robert Kennedy, Malcolm X, and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.—all were also assassinated. In the 1960s, the residents of the North Side of Minneapolis were predominately Jewish and African

American. Both groups of people had been relegated to the North Side by racism and housing rules.

The representative shared with us that in Minneapolis in the 1960's, African Americans were not allowed to go downtown to shop or eat. They were allowed to go downtown to be entertainers and to clean but not to shop or eat. Also, tensions were building between the African American and Jewish residents on the North Side. As housing and job restrictions eased Jewish residents were finding more opportunities for inclusion still not afforded to their black neighbors. In the summer of 1967 a scuffle happened between a police officer and a female African American. Riots broke out on the North Side of Minneapolis in response to this incident.<sup>4</sup> African Americans had reached their boiling point for discrimination and racism.

Businesses were destroyed in the riots as well as relationships between black and Jewish neighbors. In the aftermath of the riot the mayor of Minneapolis met with the North Side residents. As a result of that meeting the mayor offered city land as a site for a new community center. The community center was built and called "The Way." This building allowed the residents on the North Side a place to gather and to begin to rebuild being a community. Until "The Way" was built there had not been any community buildings for youth or adults to gather other than churches. Rev. Givens shared that "The Way" was a "well" for the residents of the North Side. Even though a "well" was created the North Side of Minneapolis still struggled (and struggles to this day) under the weight of racism and discrimination. Years later "The Way" fell into disrepair and the land was

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<sup>4</sup> For further information on the riot of 1967 please see the Minnesota Historical Society web site. <http://www.mnopedia.org/event/civil-unrest-plymouth-avenue-minneapolis-1967>.

once again claimed by the city of Minneapolis. The city built the Minneapolis police department's Fourth Precinct on that land.

On November 15, 2015, on the North Side of Minneapolis, Jamar Clark, an African American male, being questioned by two police officers, was shot in the head and killed by a white Minneapolis police officer.<sup>5</sup> Many unanswered questions surrounded the shooting and for several weeks after the shooting the residents of the North Side held a protest and occupied an area in front of the Fourth Precinct. While protesting at the police precinct makes sense as a response to the killing of Clark, there was another meaning attached to the protest. The precinct sits on the land that once was the “well” for the community called “The Way.” The two police officers involved in the shooting were not indicted for the killing.

Rev. Givens and the representative of the organization where we met helped us to piece together the significance of the protests at the Fourth Precinct. They also helped us understand the reality of the North Side of Minneapolis being a “food desert.” There are not many healthy restaurant food options, grocery stores are lacking and healthy food options are lacking in the grocery stores that are there. We ended our time together in prayer.

### Third Pilgrimage Location

Our third stop on the Twin Cities Pilgrimage was a visit to the oldest African American church in Minneapolis. This church was a gathering place for the Black Panthers in the 1970's. The pastor who served the church in the 1970's welcomed the

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<sup>5</sup> For a timeline and more information on the killing of Jamar Clark, please see KARE 11 website. <http://www.kare11.com/article/news/investigations/jamar-clark/jamar-clark-timeline-how-did-we-get-here/89-99906515>

Black Panthers and he was also very involved at “The Way.” Today the pastor of the church is the son of the pastor who welcomed the Black Panthers to meet in this historic church building. The pastor today has been involved with Black Lives Matter and was present at the Fourth Precinct during the protest and occupation over the killing of Jamar Clark.

As we gathered, Rev. Givens read 1 Peter 2:4-6:

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture: “See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

Rev. Givens then shared the story from Joshua Chapter 4, of the people of Israel crossing the Jordan River with the priest carrying the Ark of the Covenant. After everyone had safely crossed the Jordan, Joshua said to the Israelites

When your children ask their parents in time to come, “What do these stones mean?” then you shall let your children know, “Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground.” For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you crossed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we crossed over, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, and so that you may fear the Lord your God forever.

The pastor of the church told us how the black church was born out of oppression and out of the discrimination found in white churches. The black church also served as settlement houses so that slaves could get acclimated as they escaped from slavery. He then reminded us that slave labor built the white churches. He gave the example of slaves building balconies in churches and being told that is where they now had to sit for worship. Slave labor laid the cornerstones of the churches.

Rev. Givens made the connection of this historic black church being a rock in the community. From the Black Panthers to Black Lives Matter this church has worked for justice and fought against inequality. When the children of the church ask the elders of the church what this church means and stands for, they can say they have stood for justice. Rev. Givens asked us what we will tell the children of our churches if they ask us what the church, the rocks of the building, mean and stand for. We closed in a prayer led by the pastor of the church.

#### Fourth Pilgrimage Location

Our last stop on the Pilgrimage was to a grassy spot on the side of the road on Larpenteur Avenue West in Falcon Heights, Minnesota. Falcon Heights is a municipality that sits between Minneapolis and St. Paul. On the street next to this grassy spot on July 6, 2016, Philando Castile was killed by a St. Anthony Village police officer. The city of Falcon Heights contracted with St. Anthony Village police department to serve as their police force. Mr. Castile was driving a car and his girlfriend and her four-year old daughter were passengers in the car. The police officer pulled Mr. Castile over because he looked like a person involved in an earlier robbery. The officer said that the driver (Mr. Castile) had a “wide set nose” and that is the reason he fit the description of the robber. After Mr. Castile stopped and the officer came to his car, Mr. Castile, still seated in the car, informed the officer that he was armed and had a permit to carry a weapon. Within seconds the officer shot and killed Mr. Castile in front of his girlfriend and her four-year old daughter.

Over the months since the shooting a memorial has arisen at that grassy spot on the side of the right at the exact spot where Mr. Castile was killed. This is the grassy spot

that two of us gathered with Rev. Givens. The third pastor made a choice not to come that day. That will be explained later in the analysis.

The memorial has flowers; one of the aprons Mr. Castile wore as a nutritionist at a school; a chalkboard to write reflections; as well as a permanent memorial. On one side of this memorial are the words of Mr. Castile's mother: Son, You Never Talked Much Here, But You're Making A Lot Of Noise Now, Baby! On the other side of the memorial are the words of Nelson Mandela:

I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and achieve. But if needs be it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

Rev. Givens knew Mr. Castile by his first name, Philando. As we sat on a beautiful day in April on this grassy spot as cars drove by, Rev. Givens talked about the shooting of Philando and what it was like to get the phone call from Philando's mother.

He then read two scriptures. The first scripture was Jeremiah 31:15-17:

Thus says the Lord: A Voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more. Thus says the Lord: Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for there is a reward for your work, says the Lord: they shall come back from the land of the enemy; there is hope for your future, says the Lord: your children shall come back to their own country.

Rev. Givens then read Psalm 116:15 "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones." He then looked at the other pastor and me and said "I asked you to be sure to bring a pen and paper with you this time." He had asked and we had our pen and paper ready. He then asked us to write Philando's eulogy. I looked at Rev. Givens and said, "I have no right to write Philando's eulogy." He smiled and replied, "You are right. Now write his eulogy."

The other pastor and I sat on the grassy spot right next to the road where Philando was killed and both of us wrote our eulogies for Philando. When we finished writing Rev. Givens asked us to read aloud what we had written. Sitting in the midst of the memorials left for Philando and the words of his mother and Nelson Mandela we both read what we had written. Rev. Givens closed us in prayer.

### After the Pilgrimage

After each of the four meetings, the white clergy preached the following Sunday from the text that Rev. Givens shared with us. The other two pastors gave me manuscripts and videos of their sermons preached in their respective worship services. Two of us preached four sermons and one pastor preached three.

Within two weeks of our last meeting with Rev. Givens, I conducted exit interviews with the two white clergy who participated in the project. While I did return to several of the questions I asked at the beginning of the process, in this interview I also asked questions that included: How has your participation in this project changed your understanding of white privilege? If it has not changed, why? How did it feel to hear the stories that were shared with us? If you shared the stories in your sermons what impact did that have on you? Were you nervous, scared, hesitant, confessional? And what impact do you believe your participation in this project has had on your preaching?

I directed one question to only one of the white clergy participants: What impact did it have on you to not attend the last meeting and preach the last sermon? After the exit interviews I sent the videos of our sermons to Rev. Givens for his critique and feedback. After Rev. Givens had time to review our sermons we met and discussed the impact this process had on him.



### **Summary**

In summary, Rev. Danny Givens and I developed this project that included a Twin Cities Pilgrimage experience. Rev. Givens selected four locations in the Twin Cities of historical significance and/or importance for the African American community to meet with the white clergy involved in the project. At the meetings the white clergy heard a scripture text and learned the history of each location. The white clergy then preached from the selected text the following Sunday. Two of us attended all four meetings and preached four sermons. One of the participants attended three meetings and preached three sermons. The two white clergy participants, besides myself, gave me their sermon manuscripts and videos. I shared the videos of their sermons as well as my own with Rev. Givens for his critique and feedback. Initial and exit interviews were held with the two white clergy to determine the impact of the project on their preaching and on them personally. I met with Rev. Givens to discuss the impact the project had on him as well.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

For purposes of analyzing the results of this project the two white clergy, other than me, who were involved in the project will be known as Clergy 1 and Clergy 2. I will examine the responses of Clergy 1, Clergy 2 and myself from the initial interview; search for whether the stories of the locations were shared in the sermons; find moments where we confessed our knowledge of or role in white supremacy as well as personal stories of white privilege or white supremacy; examine the responses from Clergy 1, Clergy 2 and myself from the exit interview and share Rev. Givens' critique and feedback.

#### **Initial Interview**

Clergy 1 is a pastor, in her 60's, of a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) church in Minneapolis. Eighty percent of the congregational members are fifty years of age and older. There are no persons of color in this congregation she serves. At the time of the project Clergy 1 had served the congregation for eight years as pastor and four years prior as a part time minister. She has participated in several Anti-Racism seminars and served on the Anti Racism Unit of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the Upper Midwest Region. White privilege was not addressed in her ministerial education.

Growing up in predominately white neighborhoods, there were several experiences of from childhood and from her young adult years plus her friendships with persons of color that have informed her understanding of racial conflict and

reconciliation. She has been drawn to the word “all” in her biblical interpretation due to her understanding of white privilege. Galatians 3:28 “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” has been a cornerstone for her. She believes she has addressed white privilege in her sermons on occasion prior to her involvement in this thesis project. She has had the experience of being the racial minority when she traveled to Sierra Leon in West Africa. Clergy 1 and her spouse made the conscious decision to have their children attend school for several years in the Minneapolis Independent School District. Their children were the racial minority in the schools that they attended.

Clergy 2 is in her 40’s, and is a pastor of an Evangelical Lutheran Church of America in Minneapolis. The congregation has two different worship services on Sunday mornings: traditional and jazz. The traditional service is attended primarily by members who are fifty years of age and older. Primarily Millennial and Gen X members attend the jazz service. The congregation is predominately white with 4% people of color. At the time of the project, Clergy 2 had been in her ministry setting for ten months. She has not participated in any Anti-Racism training. However, she did take classes on Liberation Theology in seminary. White privilege was not addressed in her ministerial education.

Several events and experiences have informed her understanding of racial conflict and reconciliation. One of those experiences was watching the news on television over the past few years about the encounters between persons of color and white persons (as seen in demonstrations, in video clips showing police officers and persons of color, and in hearing news’ commentators speak about events and interviews with local and national leaders). Another experience she related referred to the many stories told and shown on

television and in the local papers about the killing of Philando Castile. Also having a relative who is a Sheriff's Deputy has allowed her to hear personal comments and stories about the challenges that the Deputy faces. Having served churches in the Twin Cities suburbs prior to the present location where she is currently pastor, has given her a background against which to reflect her newly informed understanding of white privilege and the impact that now has on biblical interpretation. Prior to this thesis project she has "dipped her toe" into addressing white privilege in her sermons. She has been concerned about "political correctness" that divides people. She has experienced being the racial minority on church Mission Trips to places such as the Southside of Chicago, Mexico and Guatemala. She served her intern year in New Mexico where she was the minority among Latina/Latino and Native Americans.

I am a pastor, in my 50's, of a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) church in Minneapolis. The congregation represents all ages with 60% over the age of fifty. At the time of the project I had been in my ministry setting for a little over four years. I have participated in several denominational Anti-Racism trainings. I attended Brite Divinity School and white privilege was addressed in my ministerial education. Growing up in Mississippi has had the biggest impact on my understanding of racial conflict and reconciliation along with the systemic racism that has been exposed in the police shootings of black men in the past several years. I would love to believe that white privilege has informed my biblical interpretation in favor of recognizing that it is a sin. Instead I believe that white privilege has allowed me to continue to view scripture through the lens of white privilege. In recent years I have addressed white privilege in my sermons on several occasions. However, I have not named white privilege or white

supremacy. Instead I have described it. I have experienced being the racial minority in Kenya, Tanzania, Mexico, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Israel, Jordan, Turkey, Bosnia and Croatia.

### **Sermon Responses**

The sermon responses are organized by the pilgrimage sites visited. I highlight the places in our sermons where we shared the stories of the locations we visited. I also highlight the moments where we confessed our knowledge of or role in white supremacy as well as personal stories of white privilege or white supremacy.

### **Rondo Neighborhood**

Clergy 1 used Psalm 12 as the text for her sermon as well as several other scriptures. She focused on part of Psalm 12:5 “I will now rise up, says God.” She did choose to share the story of the Rondo Neighborhood as we heard it at our meeting with Rev. Givens. She said Black Lives Matter from the pulpit. She confessed in her sermon that our meeting with Rev. Givens had left her challenged in her ability to understand anything about what it “feels like or means to have to stand up and proclaim Black Lives Matter.” She also confessed in her sermon that she finally understood that the slogan Black Lives Matter “does not mean that other lives do not matter.” She shared a story Rev. Givens shared with us about a white friend of his driving through what is left of the Rondo Neighborhood and being afraid because of seeing black men gathered on the corner. Rev. Givens said to his friend, “We are standing on the corner visiting with each other” (just as white people stand around and visit with each other). Clergy 1 then said, “That has happened to me too.” While she did not say “I have been afraid to drive on

streets where black men are standing on the corner,” she came close to confessing this aspect of racism and white supremacy.

Clergy 2 used Psalm 12:5 as the basis for her sermon “Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan, I will now rise up, says the Lord; I will place them in the safety for which they long.” She began her sermon by sharing the title of this thesis. As she preached she admitted that she (was hearing in her mind) this text as a “fight song” that speaks of God arising on the side of justice and that she herself will be right there fighting for justice. Then when she heard the text in the midst of the story of the Rondo neighborhood story something changed. Clergy 2 confessed that she has lived in the Twin Cities her entire life except for four years of seminary and internship and she had never heard the story of what happened to the Rondo neighborhood. She shared the story with the congregation, touched briefly on the area now being a place “where black men are standing on the corner,” and then mentioned gentrification. She confessed that hearing this text in the context of “systemic racism” gave her the sudden awareness that the Psalm verse is not about her anymore but “feels like a word of balm” for those whose neighborhood was ripped apart.

Clergy 2 then confessed that she has never experienced real oppression as a woman. She has not experienced oppression like the oppression that surrounds African Americans, Transgender, Immigrants or persons who are part of the LGBTQ community. She said that this acknowledgement does not invalidate the text for her, instead this acknowledgement deepens the impact of the text on her. She shared that the text convicted her but she did find comfort in the text. She confessed, “While I feel guilt for

not knowing” and “I feel a little guilt for institutional racism” and “as I acknowledge my white privilege,” I know that when God arises God arises for all.

I also used Psalm 12:5 as the text for my sermon. I confessed that I have not known the pain of being taken from my land such as had our Hebrew ancestors following the destruction of Jerusalem and the scattering of people. I shared that my Irish Catholic relatives had their land taken from them in Ireland and I know the impact the generational impact grief has had on my family for generations since 1849. Due to my involvement with Standing Rock I shared how the Standing Rock tribe would hear the words from Psalm 12 “because the poor are despoiled, robbed” differently than those sitting in the congregation that morning would hear it.<sup>1</sup> Then I shared the story of the Rondo neighborhood and the importance of that neighborhood. I returned to the generational impact of systemic racism. I admitted that it would be easy to “make myself feel better” and use this text to say that “God’s got this under control”—after all the Scripture says “I will place them in the safety for which they long”—which means “I don’t have to do a thing and can breathe a big old sigh of relief.” This cannot happen though because of Jesus. Jesus calls us to stand with the marginalized, the outcasts, the vulnerable, the poor, the sick and those in prison. I was the least confessional of the three clergy in my sermon!

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<sup>1</sup> I participated in the gathering of over 500 clergy from around the United States at the Standing Rock Oceti Sakowin Camp on November 3, 2016. I returned to Standing Rock January 4-6, 2017 and gathered with clergy and laity from the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). I also organized and led a delegation of Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) clergy to Washington, D.C. for the Standing Rock March on March 10, 2017.

### North Side of Minneapolis

Clergy 1 used selected verses from John 9:1-41 as the text from which she preached. She focused on “blindness” and found herself asking the question “Surely, I’m not blind am I?” She shared part of Rev. Given’s life story, mentioned that our meeting that week was at an organization that was working for better food and healthier eating on the North Side and then mentioned the “fires along Plymouth Avenue” on the North Side of Minneapolis in the 1960’s. She confessed that she had heard about the fires. She then shared that in the hearing of why the “fires” occurred she became aware of her “own enduring blindness.” She continued, “I was alive during the fires on Plymouth but I can confess to you that I did not know a thing about it.”

She shared the tactic used by banks in the 1950’s, 1960’s and 1970’s of “redlining” certain groups of people from receiving loans. She confessed, “I didn’t know that the black folks were redlined. It wasn’t my neighborhood.” She likened herself to the Pharisee in the story from John 9 as the “Pharisee who didn’t know.” She confessed that her blindness was in seeing “how others were expected to put up and shut up.” She made an important confession in her sermon by saying “We need to stop asking black people to take care of us feeling guilty. They’ve got their own lives to handle and they don’t need to take care of me feeling bad.” At the end of the sermon Clergy 1 read the text from Genesis 26 (and the Philistines stopping up the wells their ancestors of the Hebrews had dug) that Rev. Givens shared with us that week.

Clergy 2 used the text from Genesis 26 as the text for the day. She structured the sermon around four stories: the nonprofit organization where we met on the North Side; the history of the North Side; the story of The Way; and the story of digging wells in



Genesis 26. Similar to Clergy 1, Clergy 2 shared the three stories involving the North Side of Minneapolis before delving into Genesis 26.

In sharing the story of the nonprofit, Clergy 2 shared the image of walking into a grocery store in a predominately white neighborhood. The first items seen are flowers, fruit and vegetables. When one walks into a grocery store on the North Side of Minneapolis, the first items seen are processed foods. The realization that the first items one sees in a grocery store in a predominately white neighborhood are items of beauty (such as flowers) and items of healthy foods (such as fruits and vegetables) is eye opening when one realizes this is not the reality in grocery stores on the North Side of Minneapolis.

In sharing the history of the riots on North Side, Clergy 2 confessed that while listening to the story

I wondered why there was a whole bunch of Jewish people and Black people in one neighborhood. Then it hit me again like a 2x4 in the face. They were not allowed to have houses anywhere else.

Clergy 2 confessed that she “had not heard of The Way,” when she began sharing that story. After she engaged Genesis 26 as the fourth story she confessed, “If I had been given this Genesis text without any context to go with it . . . I would say let’s talk about perseverance and persistence.” Acknowledging the context in which she heard the text she says she that she has “not been so sure the past couple of days.” After living with the text and the stories for several days, she believes that she “still needs to preach about persistence,” because “when opposition comes we need to . . . worship the Lord and dig a well.”

Several powerful confessions followed this part of her sermon. Clergy 2 confessed that “because the narrative I have today is deeper and broader than the narrative I had on Wednesday so is the message” I am preaching today. In examining the four stories she confessed that “my story is just part of God’s bigger story. Your story is just part of God’s bigger story.” In hearing the stories and sharing the stories Clergy 2 understands that the

collective narrative gets bigger and broader and wells spring up. When I share the stories with you the narrative gets bigger and broader and wells spring up. When stories move us to action the narrative gets bigger and broader and wells spring up.

Toward the end of her sermon Clergy 2 confessed, “I’ve lived here my whole entire life. Each week I feel like I’m learning my own history.”

For my sermon I also chose to use Genesis 26:17-22 as the text. Unlike Clergy 1 and Clergy 2, I explored Genesis 26 at the beginning of the sermon. I took the congregation on a journey of what it would be like to wake up and find that we had no water. If this went on for any period of time we would go to City Hall demanding that we have water. If we were told that our neighborhood was not going to have water again we would go to the Governor’s Mansion and demand that we have water. If we discovered that another neighborhood had water we would say that our neighborhood is as important as that neighborhood. I reminded the congregation that Isaac must have felt the same way since he gave names to the wells that were taken away from him that mean “contention” and “hostility.”

I shared the story of the riots on the North Side and began with the story of African Americans not being welcomed in downtown Minneapolis at that time. Like Clergy 1 and Clergy 2, I moved from that history to the history of The Way. I told the

congregation “Lent is the perfect time for us to examine who we are and the role the color of our skin has played in the lives of other people.” I shared that life has been a struggle on the North Side. For “50 years people have kept trying to dig the wells only to have other people push them back.” The wells are needed for the basics of life and to refresh their thirst for daily living.

I then shared that the stories I heard that week in our meeting with Rev. Givens had “caused me to reflect on the time period in Hattiesburg, Mississippi where I grew up.” I shared that I have always been proud of my hometown because we did not have the intense riots that other towns had during the 1960’s. After sitting at the nonprofit on the North Side of Minneapolis and hearing the stories of the riots and people 50 years later still trying to have healthy food choices, I confessed that “I have shown my white privilege every time I have said that my hometown was such a good place because we didn’t have riots.” Sitting and hearing the stories of a place that is not my childhood home, not a part of my history opened my eyes to confess

It has taken me 50 years to understand that there could be no riots because the Ku Klux Klan was threatening and/or killing and/or firebombing the houses of anyone who as they like to say in the South—didn’t remember his or her place. There was no push back for trying to dig a well—there was no place to even try to dig a well.

I then asked in my sermon, “Why is it so hard to comprehend that God created every single one of us? Why do we struggle with the diversity that God has created?” I ended the sermon with a reminder that there are people on the North Side of Minneapolis who “are daily trying to dig a well only to be told no.” Yet they keep trying to do so that “they may have life, their children can have life, their grandchildren may have life . . .”

They are looking for the well called Rehoboth, “the Broad Place,” where there is water for all.

### Historic Black Church on North Side of Minneapolis

Clergy 1 used the text from Joshua Chapter 4 (stones as a reminder of God drying up the river so the former slaves could cross over), as the basis of her sermon. She said to the congregation toward the beginning of her sermon

None of us sitting here today have experienced being literally enslaved that you were held in someone else’s service—you were unpaid, you were disrespected as a human being by not being paid and being held in bondage.

She then addressed the women in the congregation and acknowledged that women have not always had a voice. It was not until the Voting Act in 1920 that women were granted the right to vote. Clergy 1 then said, “only white women” were given the right. She then shared that African Americans were granted the right to vote in 1965. She used these examples of institutional racism, as white men have been the primary decision makers throughout much of the history of the United States of America.

Clergy 1 then moved to the story of the call to ministry of the pastor who serves the historic black church on the North Side of Minneapolis. She told of the history of the church being formed out of a slave church in St. Paul, Minnesota and serving as a black settlement church for slaves escaping from the South to the North. As she shared the stories heard in the meeting including the Black Panthers meeting at the church she said that she “heard the ways history is covered up so that others in the world can remain comfortable.” She confessed that Rev. Givens and the pastor of the church “were laying foundational history out in a way I had not heard it before.”

She used the phrase “white supremacy” and explained that the pastor (of the historic North Side black church) was grateful for the use of the phrase in our group. She said the pastor believes “that really is what we are standing up in the face of.” She shared the story of the pastor going to the Fourth Precinct during the protests over the killing of Jamar Clark. She quoted the pastor saying, “police officers in riot gear—it unsettles the people.”

Her sermon then moved to the people of God being a living memorial and Rev. Givens reading 1Peter 2:4-6, toward the end of our time together. She added verses 1-3 to her reading.<sup>2</sup> She confessed, “I just didn’t know. I haven’t known another peoples’ history very well.”

Clergy 2 also used the text from Joshua as the basis for her sermon. She began in the text and focused on the importance of the stone as a reminder for the people to what God has done and God is doing. She then shared that the meeting this week was at a historic black church on the North Side of Minneapolis. When she shared that the church had been dedicated in 1889 she acknowledge that is the same year the church that is hearing the sermon was dedicated. Two churches sharing the same dedication year but they are worlds apart.

Clergy 2 brought in the text Rev. Givens had shared from 1 Peter. She said that the stones of the buildings do not have life on their own. It is the people who bring life to the stones as they share the stories of what God has done. The pastor of the historic black church said several times “when Jesus shows up everything changes.” Clergy 2 used that

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Peter 2:1-3, “Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.”

phrase to begin to tell the story of the pastor's life as a preacher's child and his own call to ministry. He has had a ministry of presence including being present with protestors and police at the Fourth Precinct during the protests over the shooting of Jamar Clark. She said that the pastor said that being present is hard. At the Fourth Precinct it was hard because as Clergy 2 heard from the pastor "the pain that the community held so hard was difficult to keep contained."

Clergy 2 acknowledged that the historic black church "takes heat" from some because they let the community meet there to work for justice. She mentioned Black Lives Matter, Civil Rights, Black Power and The Way. Clergy 2 was not personally confessional in this sermon although she did say that here are two churches "who started the journey at the same time." They both have "wonderful narratives that have never met before." Then she left the congregation with a question: "What do we do when we encounter the narrative of this historic black church?"

As did Clergy 1 and Clergy 2, I also used the texts from Joshua and 1 Peter as the basis for my sermon. I began with the text from Joshua and suggested that the story is so vivid that the congregation may have imagined rocks from the North Shore of Lake Superior or Stonehenge. I then suggested that many of them did not think of the historic black church on the North Side of Minneapolis. I shared the history of the church being born from the oldest black church in Minnesota that was started by slaves.

I told the story of the current pastor's father having been the pastor before him. His father brought black liberation with him to that congregation. I told the congregation that the current pastor remembers how "kind the members of the Black Panthers were.

They fed people, they worked to drive out the drug dealers and the prostitutes.” I then said that this was “a little different story than what many of us heard on news reports.”

First Christian Church, the church where I am serving, was dedicated several years before this historic black church but both had been forming around the same time. I acknowledged that both churches hold rich histories. However, the black church holds history with The Way, the Black Panthers and Black Lives Matter. I shared that the pastor went to the Fourth Precinct after the killing of Jamar Clark in the hopes of being a “presence of hope and calm.” Then I reminded the congregation that the black church was “born out of oppression.” Many were settlement churches that helped slaves as they escaped from the South to the North.

I then said, “I wish I could describe the emotions I experienced” when the pastor said, “you know slave labor built the white churches back then. Slave labor laid the stones for those churches.” Then I shared the turning point for me in the meeting earlier that week. It was when the pastor shared that slaves were told to build balconies in churches and then told that is where they had to sit. I said

It was out of necessity, it was out of oppression, it was out of being forced to be Christian and then excluded from the fullness of life that Jesus offers to all that black churches were formed.

I confessed that it was “the balcony that got me.” I shared a story about the African American custodian at the Presbyterian Church in my hometown where my mother played the organ. I would visit with Manny when I was little whenever I went with my mother to church for her to practice on the organ. I shared my memories of time spent with Manny: helping him clean, riding the floor buffer machine, riding in his car to go visit his wife (whom I adored). I reminded the congregation that this would have taken

place in the 1960's in Mississippi. It was risky for a black man to have a little white girl in his car.

I told of Manny's incredible work ethic and how beautiful the church always looked down to the sparkle of the brass in the sanctuary. Due to the lack of youth my age at my Disciples of Christ church next door to the Presbyterian church, as I got older, on Sunday nights I attended youth group at the Presbyterian church. The youth would sit together in the balcony for Sunday night worship. Manny was always at the church on Sunday morning and Sunday night. I told the congregation that on Sunday nights Manny would attend worship and sit at the very back of the balcony. One Sunday night in the 1970's, the pastor at the time asked for everyone to sit on the main floor. I looked back at Manny and said "come on we have to go downstairs." Manny wound up telling me in no uncertain terms that he was not going downstairs. At the time I thought Manny was being rude. In my sermon I confessed

This past Monday as we gathered in the home of this old historic black church that has fought for years for equality and justice for people of color . . . and heard the story of how the black churches started—a story that I knew . . . but to hear the story from the Pastor about the balconies—I finally knew after all of these years that Manny wasn't mad at me that Sunday night. He was scared for his life and he was scared for my life and my friends' lives—he knew that he wasn't allowed to sit on the main floor and if I continued to make a big deal about it people would know that he was up in the balcony.

I continued with the confession that

There is privilege to having the same color of skin as the color of supremacy. Privilege of where you get to sit. Privilege of never having to stop and figure out why your black friend won't do what you want them to do.

I said that Manny and his wife, Evelyn, were my living stones. The members of the church were not my living stones. I challenged the congregation to hear that we are



called to be the “living stones” that stand in the “waters of indifference” (as Rev. Givens says) and along with God be “a part of building something new.”

### Philando Castile’s Sacred Garden

Clergy 2 did not attend this meeting. Her explanation for not attending is addressed in her Exit Interview.

Clergy 1 used both of the texts that Rev. Givens shared that day: Jeremiah 31:15 and Psalm 116:15.<sup>3</sup> She also used a text from Exodus<sup>4</sup> as well as a post Resurrection story from the Gospel of John.<sup>5</sup> She began by telling the congregation that our group had been invited to “sit, listen, feel, think and pray . . . to be present in a sorrowful place.” She had put the picture of the memorial marker at Philando’s Sacred Garden on the front of the worship bulletin.

She briefly made a connection between the site and the entrance to the State Fair, whose theme is “the Great Minnesota Get Together.” She shared how Rev. Givens knew Philando and his mother. She read the side of the marker that has his mother’s words and then said

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<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah 31:15: “This is the what the Lord says: A cry is heard in Ramah—deep anguish and bitter weeping. Rachel weeps for her children, refusing to be comforted—for her children are gone” (New Living Translation); Psalm 116:15, “The Lord cares deeply when his loved ones die” (New Living Translation).

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 14:15-16: “Then the Lord said to Moses, Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground.”

<sup>5</sup> John 20:19-29: “When it was evening that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said ‘Peace be with you.’ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he has said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the marks of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.’”

This marker calls us to stop . . . to consider the ways in which ignored imbedded institutional construct and policies in formal setting, in corporate settings and in informal settings and especially for our communities of color . . . impact in death dealing ways.

She read the text from Jeremiah and the Psalm from the New Living Translation as Rev. Givens had read from at our meeting. She made an important observation at this point, these verses were offered not for exegesis. They were offered for prayerful consideration and thought. We were to consider the words through the lens of the violent death of Philando.” She then shared with the congregation that Rev. Givens asked us to write Philando’s eulogy. She shared what she wrote that day. She said that the eulogy was for “a beautiful black child of God whose life was stolen from him.” As she continued she read, “The weeping of a mother in face of her senseless loss should make us all weep . . . should make us all stop and look at each other . . . It should make us care.”

Clergy 1 shared that after we sat and wrote our eulogies, Rev. Givens asked us to share what we had written. When asked if he wanted us to read what we had written Rev Givens answered, “Tell me how it made you feel.” Clergy 1 said in her sermon, “It is easy to separate thought from feeling . . . Danny called us to merge our thinking and feeling.”

Returning for a moment to the text from Jeremiah, Clergy 1 said, “The weeping of Rachel could be a sea of weeping for the pain we have inflicted on one another on this earth based on race.” At one point she challenged the congregation

For all of us sitting here . . . our skin color all appears to be white . . . it is time for us to simply stop and think and pay attention in all our interactions . . . to how ignoring institutionalized viewing of one another can impact and make life so awful for folks.

Acknowledging that it was the Second Sunday of Easter, which typically is a time of continued celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, she said

I can't make it a pretty little thing on the Second Sunday of Easter. I can't ask us to open our eyes and our minds and our souls on to how we walk each day...Instead of us trying to figure out how to fix everything what we can do is stand or sit on a hillside and listen and find out . . . we have to learn before we go telling someone else what they should know.

As she had in the previous sermons, Clergy 1 again mentioned Black Lives Matter: "All peoples are important and by God Black lives matter." She also acknowledge again that she does not "know the way through this but I am willing to walk and find out when invited."

At the end of her sermon Clergy 1 shared an image from our meeting with the congregation

As Danny sat with us . . . he swung his hat around . . . on the back it said #killwhitesupremacy. It did not say kill white people . . . It said #killwhitesupremacy. Supremacy is the action word there.

I also used Jeremiah 31:15 and Psalm 116:15 for my sermon. I began by connecting the text from Jeremiah to its use in the Gospel of Matthew and the killing of children two years old and younger by Herod. I acknowledged

The birth of the One. The birth of Jesus. The birth of Christ. The hope of the world and the response is the genocide of children. We don't like this text during Advent, Christmas, Epiphany and we sure don't want to hear this text the Sunday after Easter.

I pointed out that there is a word of hope at the end of the text but questioned whether we can move so quickly past the wailing of Rachel. I briefly told the story from Luke of the disciples walking on the road to Emmaus (the Narrative Lectionary text for the day) and

focused on the disciples' response to the stranger: but we had hoped that he was the one. I shared that there is pain in the words "but we had hoped."

I then quoted Dr. Carolyn Sharp, Professor of Hebrew Scriptures at Yale Divinity School:

In the shadow of the Cross, we understand the Incarnation as a sign of hope clothed in vulnerability, conflict, and suffering. The Gospel shout is rooted in joy, to be sure! But to be meaningful, it must reflect an understanding of the loss, fear, and pain at the core of human existence.<sup>6</sup>

I then moved to the meeting at Philando's Sacred Garden. I also made the connection that we were also sitting at the entrance to the Minnesota State Fair. I said that where we were sitting was not a "joyful, hope filled place" because we were sitting where "Philando Divall Castile was killed by a Saint Anthony police officer in the evening on Wednesday, July 6, 2016."

I described what the Sacred Garden looked like with places to write what you hope for, trees, grass and flowers left in memory of Philando. One of Philando's aprons from the school where he served as a nutritionist is there too. I read the words from both sides of the memorial marker: Valerie Castile's words and the words of Nelson Mandela. Turning again to Dr. Sharp's words I shared that she said many times we try to "solve the suffering of the world . . ." Instead

Only in naming what has riven us and our communities can we proclaim with integrity the restoration that God offers in Christ. The preached word then becomes a word of power spoken into that liminal moment when agony is true and hope is true.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Carolyn J. Sharp, "Commentary on Jeremiah 31:15-17," Working Preacher, [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2301](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2301).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

I then shared that it was this “liminal moment where both agony and hope are true” that we met with Rev. Givens. It is that place where Rev. Givens asked us to write Philando’s eulogy. I wrote that Philando was “one of God’s beloved children.” He was “created in goodness” and loved by his family, friends and the children of the school where he worked. I said the cries of his family, friends and the children will last for years to come. I also said that his girlfriend and her daughter who were in the car the night Philando was shot also loved him. The trauma from being present for such a violent act may mean that their cries will never end.

I then used stronger language and said, “Philando was murdered, yes murdered, his life was unjustly and violently taken by a police officer.” I said that

We pray for the day that justice comes for Philando, for his family, for his friends, for the children at school. We pray and God does hear us, as God does not take the death of Philando lightly.

I spoke of my hope, using words that address

That liminal moment where agony is true and hope is true we can all begin to see people as God’s children, loved by God, children who are covered in the same grace and mercy that covers us.

Acknowledging that the “realities of life stink at times because the agony, the heartache, the injustice is real” I still had hope. I still hope that

Even when the agony is more than we can comprehend I hope that God’s love wins. I hope that God’s mercy is true. I hope that I have a chance to change my heart and a few other hearts when it come to understanding that there is no one on this earth that is any better than anyone else due to skin color.

### **Feedback from Rev. Danny Givens**

Rev. Givens and I met months after the end of the project and discussed the sermons and the overall project. I had asked Rev. Givens at the beginning of the project to be honest with his feedback.

While I stated earlier that I found statements in some of our sermons that were confessional, Rev. Givens heard more “whitesplaining” than confession. It appeared that we were trying to appease the hearers of the sermon instead of challenging worldviews. He noticed that we focused a large portion of the sermons on facts. He said that we were accurate in what we shared of the stories we heard. He has found though that predominately white congregations (at least in Minnesota) need to hear facts. We did that well. But what Rev. Givens believes will bring change is for congregations to hear what is in the preacher’s heart.

Rev. Givens saw Clergy 1, Clergy 2, and me experience deep feelings during our meetings. He was surprised that those deep feelings did not come through in our sermons. Rev. Givens said that the reality is we were hearing “in your face, hard” stories and that we were involved in “messy work.” We did not preach the “feelings” of what we experienced for the most part. The closest we came were the sermons preached after visiting Philando Castile’s Sacred Garden.

Listening to and watching the sermons, Rev. Givens said it sounded like “we were reporting about a field trip” instead of preaching about the depths of white supremacy that had been shared with us in our meetings. He was also concerned that the emphasis on some of the sermons appeared to be on him and his story.

### Exit Interviews

The questions I asked in the exit interview allowed the preachers to reflect on their experience in the project as well as on their understanding of white supremacy.

Clergy 1, when asked how her participation in this project changed her understanding of white privilege, said that hearing other participants as well as the pastor at the historic black church use the words white supremacy instead of white privilege was “profoundly meaningful and transformational.” She also talked about the hat that Rev. Givens wore during our meeting at Philando Castile’s Sacred Garden that had #killwhitesupremacy on the back. Clergy 1 realized that this does not mean, “kill white people.” Instead it means to kill white people “telling people how they are going to live their lives.” She continued saying “the understanding of privilege is not as valuable to me as being an ally at killing white supremacy.”

Reflecting on whether she believes she addressed white privilege or white supremacy in her sermons prior to participating in the project, Clergy 1 said “yes, but I peeked through the door and now I opened the door wide open.” When questioned on how it felt to hear the stories that were shared with us, Clergy 1 said

In this particular instance it felt different from other times. It felt like there was a real intent for equality at the table. I realized this most fully when we met at the nonprofit on the North Side, I felt the shades came down a bit and people were being who they are. “They let me in in” ways I have never been let in before.

Clergy 1 noticed that the people with whom we met during the project were “trusting us that we want to kill white supremacy which is a whole different kind of trust.”

Considering the impact that sharing the stories had on her, Clergy 1 said

I found myself in the writing and I got lost in the preaching. It got hold of me and would not let me go. I felt responsible. Only thing I was afraid of was preaching

in a way that someone tuned me out. The measurement for me was did they keep their ears open.

When asked if, when sharing the stories, she was nervous, scared, hesitant and/or

confessional Clergy 1 said

I am confessional in my preaching. I wanted to preach about the experiences that I had but I didn't want it to be about me . . . it had to be about more than me. It had to have a larger context than that. I know my grief is not my black sisters and brothers' problem. I didn't want to come off as a victim in front of the congregation. I wanted to leave a footpath for them to come join me.

There was an impact on her preaching due to participating in this project. She said that

It changed the lens of how I'm reading a scripture or how I select a scripture. This week's lectionary text is John 14 and I changed it mid week because I couldn't see the hand of social relevance in it for this particular week. This project has called me to the social aspects of the text. Walking in this project allowed me to say mid week I'm changing the text because social relevance matters. It is about God's spirit breathing life through us.

Clergy 1 also said that the feedback from parishioners on the sermons for the project has also had an impact on her preaching. One of the parishioners said

I want to connect with people in the neighborhood and have conversations. Your sermons during Lent were riveting to me and I want to do more of that kind of work.

The impact on her preaching has caused Clergy 1 to pause and ask, "Where do I go from here?" She said

We can't "play" church anymore. I didn't think I was playing church but in light of this experience I have to be on the lookout for what is really happening in the world and speak of it. Whether it is a death of a parishioner, women in ministry, racism, or any other issue.

Clergy 1 has a parishioner who is a Millennial who was transformed and empowered by the sermons. She also has an older member about whom she believes her sermons did not make a difference because that person does not see his role in white supremacy.



The project “opened the door wide” for Clergy 1. She is no longer “peeking out of” her office. It helped her to know “how far she can go in exploring something within the congregation.” It also helped her “grapple with the difference between the fear of sounding too political and what it means to preach the Gospel.”

Clergy 2 also had her understanding of white privilege changed due to participation in this project.

As intentional and enlightened as we try to be—we can’t. Our assumptions are just always kind of wrong. I don’t feel like I live in a bubble but I do. Complacency is also a bubble. It is hard to navigate that. It challenged my understanding of what it means to be enlightened and intentional. I had no idea that it would be so hard and that I would struggle so much with understanding it.

She thought that the experience would be inspirational, a Mission Trip of her heart and mind. Instead “it was eye opening in the little things.” Her understandings got challenged “all along the way.” Hearing information first hand such as in the story of the Fourth Precinct “made a difference.” Clergy 2 now sees “that the shooting of black males by police is a larger issue.” The project effected how she now sees police shootings of people of color. She now thinks “what does this mean for the black community. There is a bigger narrative.”

When asked if she believes she addressed white privilege in her sermons prior to the project, Clergy 2 said that she had tried with the resources available to her at the time. She reflected that previous sermons were a “very surface encounter” with white privilege. She had “dipped her toe” in it before but this time “it was overt. She was less apologetic in her preaching. She had “first hand information and experiences” to draw from due to the project.

At first, Clergy 2 felt that her narrative was no longer valid when she heard the stories that were shared at the meetings. As she struggled internally, she realized that “our stories are not invalidated but together our stories are more the story of God.” The sharing of the stories had an impact on her. She was nervous, scared, hesitant and confessional. She found herself “catching my breath—not stammering—but nervous catching my breath.”

The nerves and hesitancy were due to feeling that the sharing of the stories is “sacred and I better do it right.” She was very uncomfortable sharing other’s stories. Clergy 2 admitted her ignorance and naiveté. She believes she confessed that in her sermons. She said, “I learned a lot. A lot of this was news to me and I had to confess that I had not read scripture from this view before.” Even though there was discomfort in the experiences of the project Clergy 2 believes

We have to have these experiences. Not easy though. We don’t know how and the black community is rightfully hesitant. How do we do it in a non-threatening way? This project was grace filled and they knew why we were there. This was so beautiful. It wasn’t easy for the black clergy either!

There was an impact on her preaching from participating in this project. It changed her view of biblical preaching. She asked the question “how do I preach the Bible with an understanding that I am coming from a different perspective?” At the same time “I need to be more open to other perspectives and stories.” Clergy 2 discovered that our narrative has much to do with how we encounter a biblical text. She admitted “if I only encounter it as a white person then I am doing a disservice.”

Because we were given permission to use the stories, Clergy 2 felt that she had authority in the telling of the stories. Since Rev. Givens several times only gave the biblical text without placing it in the context of the particular book of the Bible, Clergy 2

was worried about proof-texting. Her perspective changed after the first week and she believes she “got more effective after two weeks.” She shared that she feels that white preachers may be missing something in the lectionary “when we see the ways and times that the Bible is being routinely used by the black church.” In the short time span of the project she experienced “radical changes in how I approached white supremacy from the pulpit.” The experience was transformational for Clergy 2 and for the congregation she serves.

I asked Clergy 2 one question that I did not ask Clergy 1. Clergy 2 did not attend our last meeting. Instead she went with her family for a short vacation. Since she did not attend our last meeting I asked what impact it had on her to not attend the last meeting and preach the last sermon. She said

I grieved it. It was really hard. I don’t think it would have “wrapped it in a little bow for me.” I really wanted to be there. But since it wouldn’t have “wrapped it in a little bow” I think I am where I would have been. My preaching, my theology, and my pastoral presence changed after one week. I think if I had just done one week I would still be changed. I had no idea it would change me this much. It changed me in ways that a seminary class can’t.

Clergy 2 believes that we need these experiences and to learn to take real life stories and place them into our preaching. She was skeptical when approached to be a part of the project but now believes that it has been life changing and worth the time. She said, “It was a pleasure and a gift to be a part of this.” She also added that the congregation was “super supportive.”

As for me, my participation in this project changed my understanding of white privilege. I now understand white privilege to be a symptom of white supremacy. The fact that there is institutionalized racism was made clear to me when I made the shift from focusing on white privilege to a focus on white supremacy.

While I believed that I occasionally addressed white privilege in my sermons before the project, my participation in the project made me realize the way I had sidestepped the issue by never naming white privilege or white supremacy. I felt comfortable before the project in describing white supremacy but I did not take the important step of naming it. Before the project I did not say the words “white supremacy” from the pulpit.

Hearing the stories at each of our four meetings with clergy of color was difficult at times. I felt as if we were invited into a sacred space where we did not belong. Rev. Givens and the other people with whom we met welcomed us. Upon reflection, I believe the feeling of not belonging was my issue that comes from “white guilt.” I sense that is a reaction that can happen when white people hear the stories of racism and oppression that white supremacy has caused. If we are not careful “white guilt” can keep white people from engaging fully and moving through the process of opening up one’s self up to change.

I did share the stories, shared with us by our black brothers and sisters, in my sermons. I was not hesitant to share in my sermons following the gatherings, as they were true stories that we heard first hand. I was nervous to share stories in two of the sermons. Those sermons were the one where I shared about my friend Mr. Manny Wright and the sermon where I shared the eulogy I wrote for Mr. Philando Divall Castile. I felt extremely vulnerable when sharing my role in white supremacy in regard to Mr. Wright. It is a story that I can feel in my “gut.” In the eulogy for Mr. Castile I knew that several members would take issue with me saying that he was murdered by a police officer. That made me nervous.

The impact on my preaching from this project has been to change my understanding of Biblical Preaching and have an appreciation for preaching that, to my “white seminary educated ears,” may appear to be proof-texting and not my understanding of Biblical Preaching. I also have found strength in naming white supremacy and not side stepping the issue.

### **Analysis of Data**

To determine the outcome of the project a reminder of the project goals and anticipated outcomes is in order.

1. Did white clergy share the stories in their sermons that were shared with them at the meetings?
2. Was there a shift for the white clergy in their understanding of white privilege and white supremacy?
3. Did the white clergy confess their own roles in white supremacy?
4. Did a continued relationship form between the white clergy and the black clergy?

The answers to these questions were determined from the sermons preached, the initial and exit interviews and from the feedback from Rev. Givens.

#### **Did White Clergy Share the Stories?**

All three of the clergy involved in the project did share in their sermons the stories that they heard at the meetings with the black clergy. Since African Americans shared the stories, the sharing of the stories was an important step toward offering a different lens for the preacher, as well as the congregation, to view scripture and the communities in which they live and work. All three of the white clergy experienced nervousness or fear and/or were hesitant in sharing the stories. Rev. Givens reviewed the sermons and said that all three of the clergy accurately shared the stories. In other words, the clergy “got the facts right.”

## Was There a Shift For White Clergy in Their Understanding of White Privilege and White Supremacy?

In the initial interviews two of the white clergy shared that they had participated in Anti-Racism training in some form through their denomination before participating in the project. One of the white clergy had not participated in any type of Anti-Racism training. Only one of the white clergy had white privilege addressed in her ministerial education. All three of the white clergy could name some events or experiences that formed their understanding of racial conflict and/or reconciliation. Two of the white clergy believe that their understanding of white privilege has now informed their biblical interpretation when it comes to the words that they use when they preach or that they focus on in a biblical text. One of the white clergy would like to believe that her understanding of white privilege has informed her biblical interpretation but is not sure that it has. Two of the white clergy believe that they have on occasion addressed white privilege in their sermons prior to the project. One of the white clergy believes she has “dipped her toe in it.” All three of the white clergy have had times when they were the racial minority. All three said that it did challenge and/or transform them.

After the project all three of the white clergy shifted from using white privilege to white supremacy. All three were aware that they had not fully addressed white privilege or white supremacy in their sermons prior to the project. Before the project the subject had been side stepped or mentioned in passing. In the sermons for the project white privilege and more importantly white supremacy was named from the pulpit. One of the white clergy said that there was “a radical change in how I now approach white

supremacy from the pulpit” The project also changed the lens through which the three white clergy view scripture.

### Did the White Clergy Confess Their Roles in White Supremacy?

In some ways the three white clergy did confess their roles in white supremacy and in other ways they did not. The two white clergy who grew up in the Twin Cities said several times in their sermons, after sharing the story of the location where we met, that they “did not know” or they “had no idea” about the events and feelings shared in those stories. Those are confessional statements but beyond “not knowing,” they did not share a story of their participation in white supremacy. One of the white clergy did share a story in one sermon of how she had participated in systemic racism that is a result of white supremacy.

The three white clergy did have powerful statements in regard to white supremacy in their sermons. These statements arose because the white clergy were confessional about the harm that white supremacy causes, the lingering effects of white supremacy and how white supremacy does not match the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For the purposes of this project though, one hoped-for outcome was that all three clergy would have been confessional in relating their own participation in white supremacy. At the same time, all three white clergy did stand before the congregations they serve and name white supremacy for what it is.

### Did a Continued Relationship Develop between the White Clergy and the Black Clergy?

One of the white clergy has continued a relationship with Rev. Givens. Two of the white clergy want to continue the relationship with Rev. Givens but are not sure how to make that happen. Two of the white clergy feel as if there is a friendship there, but at

this point outside of the shared experience, the friendship with Rev. Givens is a superficial friendship. Other than the friendship with Rev. Givens, no friendships were forged with other black participants in the project. The project was not structured to allow for that to happen within the time frame of the project. All three of the white clergy and Rev. Givens are agreeable to meeting again.

#### Success of Project Seen through the Lens of the White Narrative

The project was successful in helping to shift the white clergy's understanding of white privilege to an understanding of white supremacy. The project also helped to shift the lens of the white clergy through which they view scripture and the world around them. One of the white clergy addressed the slogan "kill white supremacy" from the pulpit. All three of the white clergy named white supremacy from the pulpit and one of the white clergy went so far as to say that Mr. Castile was murdered by a police officer instead of using "shot" or "killed." I believe that this shift is an important one to help us from perpetuating a white supremacy narrative in our sermons.

I believe that the project was successful to a point in helping the white clergy to be confessional about their own participation in white supremacy. It is my belief that it is important to acknowledge our ignorance when it comes to the true-life stories of our African American sisters and brothers. That acknowledgment alone is a way to take a step away from the white supremacy narrative. Beyond "not knowing," the white clergy need to begin to share stories of their role in white supremacy.

The project was not successful in fostering a continued relationship with the black clergy. One of the white clergy has a continuing relationship with Rev. Givens but she had the friendship before the project began. The project was aimed at shifting the



understandings of white supremacy for the white clergy not necessarily at building long lasting relationships.

#### Success of Project Seen through the Lens of the African American Narrative

Rev. Givens graciously examined our sermons and offered critical feedback. He believes that all three of the white clergy shared factual information regarding the stories that we heard at our meetings. He also understands that white people need facts. Rev. Givens does not feel that we were successful in being confessional in our preaching. While I see places where all three clergy offered powerful statements regarding white supremacy, Rev. Givens sees where we appeased the hearers of the sermons right before we made the statements or right after we made the statements.

The three white clergy were not successful in completely sharing how they felt. Rev. Givens could see the emotions that the white clergy were experiencing at the meetings. When he watched the sermons, the depths of the emotions that he saw at the meetings were for the most part nowhere to be found in our words or delivery. He said at times it felt as if we were on a “field trip.” Rev. Givens believes that to begin the transformation away from white supremacy, there has to be a genuine beginning with acknowledging how we feel.

#### **Lens of the White Narrative vs. Lens of the African American Narrative**

In summary, the voice of a person of color was critical to the success of this project. While through my white narrative lens I see successes, the same successes viewed through the African American narrative are so small that they are almost insignificant. Our sisters and brothers of color have to live every day under the oppression of white supremacy. White supremacy is a sin and is not a part of the Gospel

of Jesus Christ. Therefore, white clergy should not hesitate to name it out of fear of retribution from the congregation. While I am proud of the clergy who participated in this project for participating; for shifting their understanding and using words in the pulpit that they have never thought to use or have been too scared to use; for beginning to see *inferential racism* and for being as confessional as they were able to be at this time, the critical feedback from Rev. Givens shows that we white clergy have so much more work to do before we can claim “success.”

## CHAPTER SIX

### EVALUATION

#### **Strengths**

The biggest strength for this project was the enormous involvement of Rev. Givens, which he so graciously offered. While he and I created the project together, Rev. Givens selected the sites and how the story would be told to the white clergy who participated. He also selected the scripture from which the white clergy preached sermons following the face-to-face gathering of the white clergy in the project with black clergy. This allowed the project to have the voice of a person of color instead of a project created by a white person and carried out solely by white clergy.

The relationship that Rev. Givens and I built before we created the project is also a strength. Rev. Givens had previously spoken about white supremacy with the Board of the church I serve. He also preached during worship in our church. When Rev. Givens would ask for white clergy to show up to activists events in the Twin Cities Area I would show up. We would meet for coffee and talk honestly about white supremacy and we shared mutual colleagues. Because of our previous conversations, interactions and mutual colleagues we trust each other.

For this project, I trusted him to pick locations and scriptures that were of importance for the black community in the telling of stories related to specific sensitive locations. He trusted that I would pick white clergy that would not intentionally cause harm to him, the people we would meet during the pilgrimage or to the locations where

we met. We did not know what the end result would be and because of the trust we have in each other we did not try to control the process by trying to control each other's responsibilities within the project. We only knew that we had to do something to "wake up" the white clergy and we trusted each other to do our part in the process. I believe it would be difficult (and it could cause harm) for others to recreate this project if a relationship is not already present between black and white clergy.

Rev. Givens' feedback on the sermons that the white clergy preached offered insight that countered what I had deemed as "confessional" preaching. To have our sermons seen and heard through the eyes and ears of a person of color allowed for a break from the continuation of the white narrative lens through which we preach and view our preaching. While feedback from additional people of color may be beneficial, for this project Rev. Givens' feedback is crucial. We must be intentional about having our white narrative lens challenged to do the work that will lead to confessing our own role in racism, white privilege and white supremacy in our biblical preaching.

While Rev. Givens' feedback that the white clergy did not "show what was in their hearts" can be viewed as a weakness, I believe that this is one of the strengths of the project. In Chapter One I stated that I now believe that the first step toward responsible biblical preaching around this issue of confessional preaching and white supremacy is the transformation of the preacher's heart and the opening of the preacher's eyes. I based this statement on Lenora Tubbs Tisdale's "seventh hallmark of prophetic preaching" that

prophetic proclamation requires of the preacher a heart that breaks with the things that break God's heart; a passion for justice in the world; the imagination, conviction, and courage to speak words from God; humility and honesty in the preaching moment; and a strong reliance on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching*, 9.

Rev. Givens saw our hearts “break with the things that break God’s heart” at each location we visited on the pilgrimage. When he did not see that same emotion or experience that same feeling as he listened to and viewed our sermons, he knew there was a disconnect between what we know and how we proclaim what we know. I believe this is a strength in that it is invaluable feedback for the three white clergy. It causes us to ask what kept us from sharing what we so deeply felt at each one of our meetings prior to preaching. If this were the only outcome of the project I would be satisfied that it was a success.

Having two other clergy participate broadened the scope of the project beyond only one preacher preaching. This allowed for evaluating the impact of the site visits on three people who have different life stories and serve three different churches. The fact that one of the clergy did not complete the project is also a strength in that it shows how deeply the systemic nature of white supremacy runs and how difficult it is to confront it in our lives.

Placing the white clergy out of their own comfort zones was also a strength for this project. Not knowing where we would meet and what scripture from which we would preach our next sermon caused unease for the white clergy. All three white clergy use a lectionary as the basis for their preaching. This project made the white clergy have to pay attention to the story shared as well as the biblical text that may not have been a typical Lenten text. To begin to catch a glimpse of our own role in white supremacy we must be made uncomfortable, and this project did accomplish this important step.

This leads to a strength that must be acknowledged. During the pilgrimage the black clergy had the power and the control. Black clergy picked the location, the time of

day to meet as well as the story to be shared. They had the power and control to allow us to ask questions and speak or to not allow us to ask questions and speak. This was not power and control that placed anyone in harm's way. Instead it was important so that the white clergy would listen to the stories and not be planning in their minds what they would say to counter, fix or control the situation. It is also a step in moving away from white supremacy by giving up one's assumed power.

While the congregations that the white clergy serve were not the focus of this project, all three congregations were changed by the sermons preached by the white clergy. Clergy 2 has a "talk back" time in worship right after the sermon. She shared that the discussions that occurred when she preached for this project were richer and deeper than prior sermons. Clergy 1 has a discussion time after worship. She discovered that the discussion times were lasting longer and she had several members want to know how they can get involved in work against systemic white supremacy. After every sermon I had members come through the line and "confess" their role in white supremacy by sharing that they "did not know" the story shared by the black clergy. Several members also shared their new awareness of where they had played a role in white supremacy by sharing their stories with me.

I believe that through the project the white clergy are more aware of *inferential racism* and the role that white supremacy plays in our daily lives. The white clergy who were born and reared in the Twin Cities Area said over and over again "I didn't know this story." In addition, all three white clergy became more aware of the use of language that they and others use that perpetuates white supremacy. Our eyes, ears and hearts have

been opened and we cannot go back. Instead this project has caused us to realize the deep role systemic white supremacy plays in our preaching and our every day lives.

### **Weaknesses**

It was difficult to find white clergy willing to participate in this project. Many clergy in the Twin Cities Area are lectionary-based preachers due to their own choice or their congregations and/or denominations being lectionary based. To enter into this project meant that all parts of worship were disrupted due to the biblical text being different than what may have been offered in a lectionary. No matter the reason why other white clergy did not agree to participate, the fact remains that it would have strengthened this project to have several more white clergy involved.

Due to the time that it took to get the proposal for this project approved the original plan of preaching four weeks in a row during Lent could not happen. While the participants (Rev. Givens and the white clergy) tried to keep their schedules open this was not possible by the time the project was approved. Another white clergy person was going to participate but could not keep his calendar open that close to Lent.

Instead the white clergy preached the second, fourth and fifth weeks of Lent and then the Sunday after Easter Sunday. While shifts in understandings of white supremacy and confessional biblical preaching happened (although minimal), I still would like to know what the results would have been had we preached four weeks in a row. This is an important point, as the white clergy would not have had an opportunity to “step away” from the project if preaching four weeks in a row. Since we did not preach four weeks in a row we were able to “step away” from project on the weeks we did not meet. I believe

having the “breathing room” because of not preaching four weeks in a row is a weakness of the project.

Another weakness may be the limitation of the project to four weeks.

Relationships were beginning to form between the white clergy and the black clergy.

With more time together I believe these relationships would have strengthened.

Considering the difficulty in finding white clergy willing to participate for four weeks I am not sure that it would have been feasible to add more weeks to the project. I will address this further in the “modifications and improvement” section below.

One weakness that is also an indicator of the systemic nature of white supremacy is the lack of a person of color as a thesis reader for this project. While I am deeply grateful for the support and work put into this project by my advisor and second reader, this project has been viewed through a white narrative lens. I asked that the second reader on this project be a person of color but that did not happen.

### **Modifications and Improvement**

There are several modifications and improvements that I suggest for this project. As mentioned earlier, I believe adding several more white clergy to the process would enhance the project. I would not recommend going beyond five white clergy. I believe with a larger group the ability for some of the white clergy to ask honest questions at the pilgrimage locations would be hindered. I would suggest that there be diversity in denominations as well as gender and age among the white clergy.

Also mentioned earlier, I would suggest that the white clergy preach in consecutive weeks. I believe this would push the white clergy further in their



understanding of their own roles in white supremacy as well as reinforce the role white supremacy plays in white clergy's sermons.

It may be valuable to extend the length of the project. If the number of weeks increased then preaching in consecutive weeks may not be a possibility. It depends on how many weeks are added to the project. If the project were extended within the range of six weeks then preaching consecutive weeks is a possibility.

Another thought to modify and improve this project is to make it a six month or one year project where the white clergy meet monthly at a location chosen by the black clergy. This modification would allow the possibility for long lasting relationships to foster. A drawback to this modification would be the length of time between meetings. It would diffuse the power that a weekly immersion experience has on the white clergy.

It was not possible in this project for Rev. Givens to attend all of the worship services to hear the sermons in each white clergy's context. It may be beneficial to have other black clergy who are willing to be a part of a project like this and are free at the times of the white clergy's worship services to attend and critique the sermons knowing the context. If this modification is made then the issue of consecutive weeks and length of the project will need to be addressed to the benefit of the black clergy. Also, the recognition that many black clergy are rightfully tired of being the ones to educate white people on racism, white privilege and white supremacy may limit the number of black clergy in one city that are willing to venture into this journey for weeks at a time.

In summary, the strengths of the project include the participation of Rev. Givens and the trust Rev. Givens and I have with each other. The willing participation of the two other white clergy to be out of their comfort zones and to agree to the rules of the project

was essential. Their participation allowed for more sermons to be analyzed for the impact of the pilgrimage on preaching. The power and control of the pilgrimage dwelling with the black clergy as well as feedback on our sermons from Rev. Givens allowed the white clergy to give up some of the assumed power we have as white people. The new awareness of *inferential racism* that occurred for all three white clergy is a significant strength. The weaknesses of the project revolve around the lack of consecutive weeks for the pilgrimage and for preaching and the number of white clergy willing to participate. The lack of a person of color as a thesis reader of the project is also a weakness.

Modifications to the project could include increasing the number of white clergy who participate and extending the length of the pilgrimage. The pilgrimage could be extended by adding several more consecutive weeks or by meeting monthly on a six-month or yearly basis. At all times the pilgrimage modifications should be addressed to the benefit of the black clergy. It may also be beneficial for feedback of the sermons preached by the white clergy to have several more black clergy who are able to watch the videos of the sermons or hear the sermons in the context in which they are delivered.

Also in summary, the hoped for outcomes of the project were met and exceeded expectations with the white clergy acknowledging in their sermons that white supremacy exists and that they play a role in its existence. I heard the confessional tone of the sermons in the words of “I didn’t know.” This is not the confession of sharing that our hearts break “with what breaks God’s heart.” It is however, a start to confessing our role in white supremacy: we do not know the stories of our sisters and brothers of color because we can live every day life without knowing their stories. While I had hoped for

more confessions in our sermons of the roles we have played in white supremacy, I am confident that with consecutive weeks or adding several weeks this would have happened by the last sermon preached following the pilgrimage.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### REFLECTION

If we don't have any experiences then we're just talking . . . you know lots of nice words and flowery words . . . but we don't seem to value the importance of our experiences and often times the bad ones are the ones that are the best teaching moments . . . If a preacher really wants to connect with a group of people then it's important to be transparent. It's important to be human. It's important to identify with the struggles that other people are having, to be vulnerable in that moment.<sup>1</sup>

Creating and participating in this project was life changing in many ways. I, along with the other white clergy who participated, am more aware of the systemic nature of white supremacy. We who participated in the project are also more aware of how we perpetuate a white narrative in our sermons. I am also more able to name “fear of the response from the congregation” as a conscious reason for not sharing my “heart” in most of my sermons. I am also able to name the systemic nature of white supremacy as the unconscious reason for not sharing my “heart” in most of my sermons. I sense that the other two white clergy participants would agree on these conscious and unconscious reasons for not sharing my “heart.”

As a result of being able to name one of my reasons, for not sharing my “heart” as the “fear of the response from the congregation,” I have actually found the courage to share my “heart.” Recently I preached a sermon using the Samaritan woman meeting Jesus at the water well in the Gospel of John. In Karoline Lewis' commentary on the

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<sup>1</sup> Yvette Flunder, Preaching Moment 295: Yvette Flunder on Authenticity in Preaching, *Working Preacher*, 1:49, December 6, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_uADtfou7NU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_uADtfou7NU).

Gospel of John, she discusses the reaction of the disciples to finding Jesus talking with the Samaritan woman at the water well and the role this interaction plays in the story.

. . . it emphasizes further the shocking nature of this encounter, lest we forget after the lengthy conversation up to this point. The second question of the disciples, why are you speaking with her?, stresses the improbability of this conversation yet again. One might imagine a particular emphasis on “with *her*” in reading the passage out loud.<sup>2</sup>

I shared with the congregation that my call by God and by the church to ordained ministry sometimes leads me to go places and stand with groups of people that make some in the congregation uncomfortable. Because of that I have been fearful to fully share my heart because I knew I would hear “why is she talking with *them*?” I further shared that I am also like the disciples. I too have found there were many times when I asked of my colleagues “why is he or she talking with them?”

I then shared my heart with the congregation and told them that I do stand with groups such as Black Lives Matter and I did and still do stand with the Standing Rock Tribe in North Dakota in their protests. After the service the young adults in the congregation that were in worship that day of my sharing thanked me for my sermon. The fact it was the young adults who thanked me particularly touched me. I also had other members thank me. There was only one member who had harsh words to share with me. I realized then what Rev. Givens had wanted to hear in our sermons. He wanted to hear the confessions from our hearts of our roles in systemic white supremacy. I realized that when we engage in serious biblical preaching that the Gospel allows us a foundation on which to confess our roles in white supremacy.

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<sup>2</sup> Karoline M. Lewis, *John*, Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 63.

All three of the white clergy in the project found it difficult to write sermons after the pilgrimage ended. Even though it did not come through in all of our sermons, we had been touched deeply and our understanding of the world had been turned upside down. The sermons we preached required some gut-wrenching reflection and introspection. For us, our sermons were heavy with meaning and purpose. The first week after the pilgrimage ended all three of us felt as if our sermons after the project ended were superficial and lacking the depth we had in our pilgrimage sermons. This says to me that we did begin the work of confessional biblical preaching in the face of white supremacy because we found it to be gut-wrenching work.

Rev. Givens and I have discussed how to take the pilgrimage to another level for the clergy who have already participated. We have considered traveling together as a group to other cities and hearing from the black communities in the cities the stories of their sacred places. This would broaden our understanding of the systemic nature of white supremacy beyond our own backyards. We have a gathering planned in the spring of 2018 for the three white clergy and Rev. Givens. This will be one year after the pilgrimage. The white clergy who participated have asked for a way to continue what we have started. We will discuss the impact that it has had on all of us over the past year. We will also discuss what we will do next with this particular group to deepen our understanding of white supremacy and to continue to work toward confessional biblical preaching around the issue of white supremacy.

Four months after the project ended a Universalist church in the Twin Cities Area invited Rev. Givens and me to preach about our experiences from this project. We preached together taking turns back and forth speaking of the impact it had on us. Our

sermon was moving to some, engaging their own deep feelings on white supremacy. The congregation wants to have first-hand experiences to help their awareness of the systemic nature of white supremacy. The pastor of the Universalist church would like to have a group of laity from his church and from the church I serve join together to experience a similar pilgrimage.

Rev. Givens and I feel strongly that white clergy need to address their own role in systemic white supremacy so as to keep from perpetuating a white narrative in their sermons. At the same time we also recognize the value of laity joining in on the pilgrimage. We are exploring ways for us to offer the pilgrimage to a wider community.

We have also discussed what we could offer in the pilgrimage to help clergy and laity connects their hearts to “that which breaks God’s heart.” While we included people with first hand knowledge of the stories in the pilgrimage for this project we envision another way to help clergy and laity make this connection.

Using the last stop of the pilgrimage at Philando’s Sacred Garden as an example, we are planning a way for pilgrimage participants to hear from people who knew Philando in every day life. Being careful not to exploit people, we wonder if hearing the voices of people who worked with Philando, letters written by the children who attended the school where Philando worked, hearing from friends who “hung out” with Philando and possibly hearing from Philando’s mother would put a human touch on the pilgrimage that would help expose the systemic nature of white supremacy even further. For the purposes of preaching these may be experiences that white clergy need to have to be able to be more confessional in their biblical preaching.

I believe that there is incredible value in this project for white clergy who preach and those who preach not in words but in actions. I also believe that while the value of this project was directed to a small group of white clergy who preach, it could be directed to white clergy in other locations, in other parts of our country. As white clergy are made aware of how systemic white supremacy and *inferential racism* affect the sermons that they write, it is my belief that it will have an impact on the congregations that they serve. This impact can lead to members of congregations wanting to participate in a pilgrimage so that they may learn and grow in their understanding of white supremacy just as it did for the Universalist church.

As white clergy begin to be made aware of the role of white supremacy one can hope that they will also start speaking of the issues among their circle of white clergy friends as well as within their denominations, especially at denominational gatherings. This can have an impact on biblical sermon writing and preaching for white clergy on a wider level and across the country.

This awareness will hopefully lead to another awareness among white clergy of the impact that white supremacy has on other non-white ethnic groups. For example, there is a connection between the effects of white supremacy on our Black sisters and brothers as well as our Indigenous sisters and brothers. Issues as a result of white supremacy such as poverty, lack of access to jobs, healthy foods and quality education can be found in places such as the North Side of Minneapolis and on the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota. We need to be aware of the dangers that come with “a



single story,” as Novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns against in her 2009 TED-Ed talk.<sup>3</sup> Adichie warns that the single story “robs people of dignity.”

I believe that when we only begin to tell a story through our own lens, we are not able to see the fullness of God’s creation and God’s creatures. Serious biblical preaching should include an awareness of the fullness of God’s creation and creatures and uphold people’s dignity. To do this we *must* hear the stories of our non-white sisters and brothers. How can we expect the members of our congregations to address the reality and dangers of white supremacy if we, as white clergy, are not willing to first address our own role in white supremacy and our conscious or unconscious role in the perpetuation of the white supremacy narrative?

As for further research, I believe that the real task is on-going research and on-going experience. As you will see in my bibliography there is an overwhelming amount of literature on racism, white privilege and white supremacy. As I write this thesis, *So You Want to Talk About Race* by Ijemoa Oluo, is listed in the *New York Times Best Seller* list for the week of February 4-10, 2018.<sup>4</sup> I find limitless areas for further research and analysis regarding *inferential racism* and white supremacy. I wonder though if we are missing the important step of on-going experience.

Seminaries are already doing substantive work preparing students for the preaching ministry. Faculties carefully consider the classes offered and the texts assigned. I wonder if the teaching could be enriched if faculty were to participate in an experience beyond trainings and seminars such as the “Twin Cities Pilgrimage.” What if

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<sup>3</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Danger of a Single Story*, TED-Ed, 19:16, July 2009, <https://ed.ted.com/featured/TXtMhXIA>.

<sup>4</sup> Ijemoa Oluo, *So You Want to Talk about Race?* (New York: Seal Press, 2018).

seminary faculty had meetings or gatherings at places such as Philando's Sacred Garden or a historic black church on the North Side of Minneapolis on an on-going basis and heard the sacred stories of those particular locations? What impact might that have upon the faculty and their students? Could such experiences enhance the faculty's abilities to help students connect "with the things that breaks God's heart" in their preaching?

In summary, I again state from my heart that this has been a life-changing project for me as well as for the two white clergy who joined me in this journey. Our understanding of white supremacy has changed and at the same time we are very aware that we will have to do this gut-wrenching work for the rest of our lives. I believe that this type of pilgrimage will work in other places and that justice issues such as the danger of systemic white supremacy can be an integral part of our sermons with integrity if we engage in serious biblical preaching. If white preachers will begin to share what is in their hearts, how it makes them feel, to know that systemic white supremacy exists and to share their own roles in keeping it alive, consciously or unconsciously, then we white clergy can begin to change the white narrative that we all too often perpetuate in our sermons.

APPENDIX A  
INITIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Name:

Ministry Setting:

Demographics of congregation:

Percentage of People of Color in congregation:

How long have you been in your ministry setting?

Where were you before this ministry setting?

Have you participated in any anti-racism training that included an understanding of white privilege?

Was white privilege addressed in your ministerial education experience? If so, how?

Are there any events/experiences that have informed your understanding of racial conflict and reconciliation? Please describe.

Has your understanding of white privilege informed your biblical interpretation? If so, how?

Have you addressed white privilege in your sermons? If so, how?

Have there been times when you have been the racial minority? If so, how did that challenge or transform you?

APPENDIX B  
EXIT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Name:

How has your participation in this project changed your understanding of white privilege? If it has not changed, why?

Reflecting on your sermons for this project do you believe that you addressed white privilege in your sermons prior to this? If so, how?

How did it feel to hear the stories that were shared with us?

If you shared the stories in your sermons what impact did that have on you? Where we nervous, scared, hesitant?

What impact do you believe your participation in this project has had on your preaching?

What impact did it have on you to not attend the last meeting and preach the last sermon?

What else would you like to share with me?

APPENDIX C  
SERMONS SELECTED FROM PROJECT

**Sermon One**

“Because oppressed people are robbed and needy people groan, I will now arise,” says Jehovah. “I will provide safety for those who long for it.” Psalm 12:5 (NSB)

Walk Dusty. That is our theme for Lent. Walk Dusty. . .

I talked with some of you last week, and wrote about it in the e-blast this week. . . about my Lenten discipline this year. I was asked by Pastor Laurie to be part of her thesis project for her Doctor of Ministry in Biblical Preaching from Luther Seminary. The title is "Confessional Biblical Preaching in the Face of Whiteness: Challenging the Preacher's Understanding of White Supremacy."

The research study is about how experiencing the stories of people of color challenge a white preacher's understanding of white supremacy and the impact it has on their preaching. There will be four weeks between now and the end of April when I have agreed to be part of this study. And in agreeing, I have said I would be willing to go “off lectionary” (*gasp*), and take part in a gathering each of those four weeks before preaching. The gathering is simply the preachers taking part in the study led by led by people of color, in which we will be given a scripture and gifted with their stories. The challenge is to see where the scripture they choose for us, and the stories they share with us, lead me in my preaching.

This past week I was privileged with meet with Pastor Danny Givens (you may remember him from our joint worship service in September when he was our guest preacher) at his congregation's home over in the Rondo neighborhood of St. Paul. I have to tell you, I may have put this button (the Walk Dusty theme button) on my stole Ash Wednesday, but this week I really began to trudge through the dust.

The scripture he chose for us to preach with this week is Psalm 12 verse 5. The translation he shared with us is the New Simplified Bible.

“Because oppressed people are robbed and needy people groan, I will now arise,” says Jehovah. “I will provide safety for those who long for it.”

When I was on my way to the gathering on Monday, I was pondering how this whole thing was going to work. I was a bit nervous as to the scripture I would be given and how it would fit with our theme and whether or not hearing pieces of Danny's story would really affect the word I would bring this morning. Boy, was I underestimating God in this process!

I wish I could say that his story didn't change my perspective on these words from the Psalmist David. But that would not be my truth.

As the verse was read to us, I smiled. I smiled because it's a beautiful verse and while it is not one that is even included in the lectionary—so I don't think I have ever preached on it before—it is one that I immediately felt connected to. In the world we live in today, in light of the political and social issues that hit us in the head every single day I heard these words as a fight song. What do I mean? Well, as a follower of Christ, as a beloved Child of God, I immediately heard my calling in the words Danny was reading. God is coming . . . no God is going to *arise* . . . on the side of the oppressed and needy

and I am part of that work. As a Christian, as a disciple, I have been taught from a very young age and believe that the church is the way. *WE* are the way that God works in the world. I heard these words as he read them and envisioned rising up to do my part to bring safety, to bring justice, to end oppression, and to comfort those who are oppressed and in need.

I would discover after the meeting, that in context, this verse is part of an entire Psalm that speaks to this part of my faith today. According to Matthew Henry's Commentary, this entire Psalm, this prayer of lament, this groaning to God, is supposed to have been "written by David during the reign of Saul, where there was a general decay of honesty and piety both in court and country." Sound familiar? Yes, as Danny read, I heard a fight song.

And then he shared part of his story . . . .

Are you familiar with the Rondo neighborhood in St. Paul? It's funny . . . I've lived in the Twin Cities my entire life (except for my years in Ohio and New Mexico where I spent four years during seminary.) I attended Hamline University just a few miles from the Rondo neighborhood. I worked in "Frog Town" as a student. And I even lived in the Rondo neighborhood for a short time during my college years. And yet, I had not heard of the Rondo neighborhood until this week.

The Rondo neighborhood runs along 94 just west of downtown. It runs from about Lexington to Rice and runs up against summit on the south side and University on the north. This is where Danny grew up. It is where his mother has lived her entire life and where his grandmother came to settle and raise 12 children. It is a place, a neighborhood with rich tradition and a complex story. When his grandmother first came



to St. Paul, to the Rondo neighborhood to settle and raise a family, it was a community of around 30,000, made up of primarily black families who owned their own homes and businesses, where nobody locked the doors, and the front porch was where people met to connect with each other. This all changed when it came time to build a freeway.

Some of you may already know the story, but I didn't. I've lived here my entire life and I didn't. In the late 50's, when the time came to build a freeway through the Twin Cities, it was decided that rather than go through a bit north (more by the fairgrounds - closer to where highway 36 is today), that the freeway would go right through the Rondo neighborhood. It was to be built literally on Rondo Avenue the center of the neighborhood.

I don't want to spend too much time on the details, in the interest of time, but if you are interested I can point you in the direction of a short 10-minute documentary on YouTube. Or you can visit the MN History Center where the Rondo's Legacy exhibit is on permanent display.

But needless to say, the Rondo neighborhood and the black community that were so vitally connected were changed forever. Families were displaced. Their homes literally demolished without getting fair market value for what they had worked so hard for. Businesses, primarily owned by people in the neighborhood, closed either because they were torn down or because there was nobody left to serve. No laws for equal housing led many to be unable to purchase home elsewhere and so the neighborhood was gutted where it once thrived. Because the freeway literally cut the neighborhood in half, with only caged walkways to cross to the other side, the community was forever changed.

Over time, the neighborhood that never locked its doors and where kids could run and play and gather on the street for celebration and family became a place where gathering on the corner became something to fear. Oh, Rondo is beginning to thrive again. Gentrification, that's what it is called. Many of the homes that were built and owned by black families are now being restored by those who can afford to come in and fix them up . . . the affluent . . . primarily white. Businesses are thriving and new things are coming in all the time. Danny's mother still owns her home. In fact Danny is preparing to buy it this summer so that it will stay in the family and so the family will stay in the neighborhood. You see he is still there. He is there and he is telling his neighborhood's story and reclaiming his history.

After he shared the Rondo story, his story, he took us for a drive through the neighborhood.

And all of a sudden, my sermon changed.

"Because oppressed people are robbed and needy people groan, I will now arise," says Jehovah. "I will provide safety for those who long for it."

As a white girl from the northern suburbs of Minneapolis, who led a pretty sheltered existence most of her life, this scripture is about being an agent of change. It is a fight song—a call to action.

As someone who just heard the story of an entire community full of families destroyed by the institutional racism that has really only gotten less seemingly overt in the 50 years since the freeway was put in, this scripture doesn't so much feel like it is for me anymore.

This verse feels more like a balm for the families of Rondo who groaned as their neighborhood and their livelihoods were ripped up and driven through and more like a word of conviction for me.

It feels more like a word of comfort for Muslim Americans who are being yelled at to “go home” when they were born here and this is their home. It feels like a word of solace for transgender kids who were given protection and then had it ripped away. It feels like a word of hope for black men gathered on the corner just for conversation who are perceived by the world as a danger or threat. It feels like a word of reassurance for girls and young women in Afghanistan (and other countries) who take their lives into their own hands just to go to school to learn each and every day.

And some might say, “Well, Rhonda, you are a woman and women know what oppression is so why is it not a word of comfort for you in that context?”

Well, because let’s be honest. I have never truly experienced oppression because I am a woman . . . not true oppression. I have been truly blessed in that any “oppression” I have faced as a woman has been less oppression and more irritation such as men calling me sweetheart or honey in a professional setting, having men talk over me or ignore my ideas, etc. In the region of the country I have spent my life, in the neighborhood I grew up in, in the socioeconomic class I found myself in, oppression has not really come to be.

No, in light of Danny’s story, in light of Rondo’s story, the stories of its people this seems to be more of a word of conviction for me.

But where is the good news. Does Danny’s story the perspective he gifted me with does that invalidate my experience with the scripture? Is that what I am supposed to discover in this thesis study?

No. I don't think so. I think God is bigger than that. I don't think that Danny's story, or the perspective it gives on the scripture, invalidates my experience or my perspective on the scripture. I think it deepens it and gives it breadth.

The gospel reading for today the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent, is from John the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter. The very end of the reading is an oldie but goodie as my dad would say.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. *Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

Here is the good news friend . . . God intends good for us, both here in our life together and ultimately in our eternal life with God. So, whatever our story is, whatever perspective we have, whatever setbacks or even failures we may experience are always just part of the story they are temporary, because God has promised to redeem the world in and through Jesus. This is where we find our freedom and where the Psalm becomes a balm for each and every one of us. We are free to experiment and struggle and succeed and fail, to be oppressed and even to be the oppressor, to be comforted and convicted, and to live and love and die all knowing that in Christ God has already worked to redeem the whole world. In other words, redemption is God's responsibility, not ours. Whether we grow or shrink, flourish or struggle, we sometimes get preoccupied with the closest story to us that, while important, is only part of the larger story God is telling and bringing to a good end.

So what about the fight song? Oh yeah, that. Well, I think the Psalm is a fight song. I think it is a call to stand up and be God's change in the world. I think it is a call to

not be complacent because well, God is arising to bring freedom and justice and safety and solace . . . and God needs us to be part of that work. God needs us. God needs all of us. The fight song isn't just for those who grew up with a story similar to mine. The fight song is for everyone and for the people of Rondo. While they were out organized and outnumbered and out-powered by the leaders of the time and while they were just learning to fight they are called now in the balm this verse brings to hold fast to God's promises. They are called to continue to fight, not just for their own neighborhood and their own families, but for other families and neighborhoods around the globe. The fight song is for the Muslim Americans and the transgendered; it is for the LGBTQ community and for women everywhere. The fight song (the call to action) is there for everyone in the Psalm. Especially today in this place we find ourselves as people of God as workers in the kingdom.

Oh, and before I say amen. I guess I should go back and amend what I said about what this scripture feels like to me. While there is a word of conviction for me in this verse—as I reflect on my role as a white preacher in the larger context of society and the world—I guess I also have to believe there is a word of comfort there too. While I feel guilt for not knowing the story of Rondo or the people there . . . and while I feel a certain amount of guilt for the institutional racism that still moves through our country . . . as I acknowledge my white privilege and the place from which I come I also know that, in the struggle, whatever that struggle that may be, there is a safe place for me too when God arises.

It's a good thing we are not alone on this dusty walk of ours. It's a good thing I had Danny and those other preachers this week, it's a good thing we have each other it's

a good thing we have our God. Keep walking dusty friends. It's messy and it's sometimes difficult but God came to save the whole world after all. Kick up your heels and walk dusty. Amen

## Sermon Two

Found and Sent to Dig Wells

ENTER (story) John 9: 1-7, 18-21, 24-41

The story of healed blindness is read again. I've read it over and over during the past week. So many characters whose shoes one might try on. Jesus? Jesus' disciples? The man blind from birth who is healed of his blindness? The Jews who didn't believe the man healed of his blindness? The healed man's parents? The Pharisees?

Oh, the challenge this week reading this story over and over again, I could tell how much I wanted to be wearing the shoes of one who could claim to see and understand.

Like the Pharisees at the close of the reading, I too heard myself saying this week, "Surely, I'm not blind, am I?"

What part will I play in this week's Lenten Walk with Jesus? The words of Matthew 5:17-18 (words we studied in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount just before Lent began) floated by on the stream of life's memory . . . sort of like a life preserver in my yearning to see and understand what I've just not known about.

<sup>17</sup>"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. <sup>18</sup>For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

I was struck by the Jesus' responses to those surrounding the man who had been healed of his blindness, revealing once again that we are not "saved" by being good but it is God's incarnate goodness among us that saves us.

Our Lenten walk this year has taken on a particular significance through participation in a ministerial colleague's doctoral project in which we're being guided to explore the gospel message of Christ Jesus through the lens of a young black clergyman named Danny. The Rev. Danny Givens. A man who grew up in the Rondo neighborhood of St. Paul and knows intimately of the losses the African American community has suffered when communal blindness, whether accidental or volitional has occurred. Today, Danny is working prayerfully and nonviolently in Christ to open hearts, souls, and minds to understand what living as if Black Lives Matter really means to ALL and everyone.

Danny has given full permission to speak openly of him and his life experiences that we might full understand the walk he has taken in life.

If you go home and Google "Danny Givens" you'll find that he is an ordained pastor in St. Paul at Above Every Name. Danny has stated more than once that he's been in prison. I've not asked him about it, he just seems to want us to know that's been a part of his walk. Online info fills in the blanks with in his late teens he committed an armed robbery and ended up in a face-off with an off-duty police officer in which they both fired at each other, but both lived. Interviews Danny has given reveal him saying, "I realized I needed to do a deeper work. I started having questions why I was engaged in the behavior I was in."

Family, faith and education called to Danny.

We can read about the fact that

His younger brother's best friend was Philando Castile, who was fatally shot by a St. Anthony police officer last year in Falcon Heights.



Or that he presided over the funeral of his first cousin's 2-year-old son, Le'vonte King Jason Jones. The toddler was fatally shot in the chest during a drive-by shooting in North Minneapolis on July 8, two days after the Castile incident and one day after five Dallas cops were gunned down and seven others wounded by a deranged gunman. Rev. Givens, who serves as a pastoral liaison to Black Lives Matter Minneapolis.

You can search yourself whether searching another on Google or searching within yourself before God in Christ. Having been a part of the group meeting with Danny and a friend of his at Appetite for Change on Plymouth Avenue in North Minneapolis this past week, I confess to all of you that I could not get out of my heart, soul and head the experience of my own enduring blindness, and the hope that Jesus might come along on his walk and find me too . . . and help me see more than I've been willing to see as reality in others' lives.

At Appetite for Change I learned about The Way a place on Plymouth Ave. in North Minneapolis. It was a gathering place for African Americans until the 1980s. Today, the 4<sup>th</sup> Precinct Police Station sits on the lot where The Way had been. I learned that folks at Appetite for Change had found a deep desire in the North Minneapolis community for food justice. They'd realized that there were 38 fast food restaurants around and that their Cub Food store, rather than having fruits and vegetables by the entry doors, there were chips, sweets and soda pop lining the entryway. Appetite for Change is working with youth and "olders" or elders as they work together to bring food justice through policy work, community gardening and building relationships through cooking together as well as bringing new healthy eatery options to the community.

I just haven't known. I didn't know that as North Minneapolis Jewish folks of northern European descent were integrated into white neighborhoods in the 60s and 70s, Black folks were redlined economically and trapped in place.

I just hadn't understood what happened.

It just wasn't in my neighborhood.

But today I keep hearing, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind and PLEASE, love your neighbor as yourself. The law and the prophets are hinged on it!!!! It's what we come to church for to learn how to love our neighbor!!! FOR THE LOVE AND SAKE OF GOD OUR CREATOR!!

As I pulled up to the building on Plymouth Avenue in North Minneapolis last Thursday morning, I had a feeling I was going to be encountering Jesus on his walk through town and that I just might be playing the part of a blind woman. By the way, no one made me feel that way human-to-human, black to white. In fact it was the love shown me in my blindness . . . my blindness to how others have been expected to put up and shut up so we can all keep the peace. It was the profound welcome, where I was being asked into the world of Black children of God rather than Black children of God being required to act like White children of God so I could feel comfortable.

In our time at Table, Danny asked us to consider the following text for our walk this week. It comes from ancient times told around tribal fires long before being written down as Hebrew text It is a template for us to consider in our walk of yearning to truly be God's children side by side on the planet.

It is a text that speaks to us and what we might do with the famine of communal blindness that can so easily comes upon us.

## CENTER (scripture)

## Genesis 26:1-22

26 Now there was a famine in the land, besides the former famine that had occurred in the days of Abraham. And Isaac (Abraham's son) went to Gerar, to King Abimelech of the Philistines. <sup>2</sup> The LORD appeared to Isaac and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; settle in the land that I shall show you. <sup>3</sup> Reside in this land as an alien, and I will be with you, and will bless you; for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will fulfill the oath that I swore to your father Abraham. <sup>4</sup> I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and will give to your offspring all these lands; and all the nations of the earth shall gain blessing for themselves through your offspring, <sup>5</sup> because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws." <sup>6</sup> So Isaac settled in Gerar. <sup>12</sup> Isaac sowed seed in that land, and in the same year reaped a hundredfold. The LORD blessed him, <sup>13</sup> and the man became rich; he prospered more and more until he became very wealthy. <sup>14</sup> He had possessions of flocks and herds, and a great household, so that the Philistines envied him. <sup>15</sup> (Now the Philistines had stopped up and filled with earth all the wells that his father's servants had dug in the days of his father Abraham.) <sup>16</sup> And Abimelech said to Isaac, "Go away from us; you have become too powerful for us." <sup>17</sup> So Isaac departed from there and camped in the valley of Gerar and settled there. <sup>18</sup> Isaac dug again the wells of water that had been dug in the days of his father Abraham; for the Philistines had stopped them up after the death of Abraham; and he gave them the names that his father had given them. <sup>19</sup> But when Isaac's servants dug in the valley and found there a well of spring water, <sup>20</sup> the herders of Gerar quarreled with Isaac's herders, saying, "The water is ours." So he

called the well Esek (which means to quarrel), because they contended with him. <sup>21</sup> Then they dug another well, and they quarreled over that one also; so he called it Sitnah (which means adversary). <sup>22</sup> He moved from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it; so he called it Rehoboth (a place of enlargement and flourishing) saying; “Now the LORD has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land.”

#### OPENING TO ILLUMINATION

In our times of blindness, may Jesus come along and find us.

May we have the humility to know when we are blind.

May we have the courage to be found.

May we have the humility, will and strength to be willing to dig wells together rather than spending any more energy on filling wells with sand.

In receiving and sharing IN God’s gospel may we be found or saved, and be sent to dig wells where ALL can truly we can live in peace. Amen.

### Sermon Three

#### A Living Stone

1 Peter 2:4-6

Come to him, a living stone and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Come to Christ—and live as God’s people. Be a living stone in this world. Christ is the cornerstone of the building—but we are the living stones.

Christ is the cornerstone—the one upon whom we should build our lives. But this isn’t a stone that is just lying on the ground doing nothing. This is a stone that brings life and brings hope to the world.

We are to be like those stones.

My friend Pastor Danny Givens read this text at our meeting this week as well as one from the book of Joshua chapter 4.

When Joshua and God’s people finally reached the banks of the waters of Jordan and could see the land that would be theirs on the other side of the river God told Joshua to let the ark of the covenant—the presence of God—pass through the waters before the people.

God said to Joshua “Select 12 people from the 12 tribes of Israel” and they will carry the ark. When the soles of their feet rest in the waters of the Jordan the waters of the Jordan flowing from above will be cut off.

When the priests and the people gathered to cross the moment that the priest dipped their feet into the waters the water stopped flowing from above—in fact the water stood still.

All of Israel crossed over the water—they crossed on dry land as the priests stood their holding the ark. Once everyone was across God told Joshua to pick 12 more people one from each tribe. Tell them to take a stone from the middle of the river right where the other 12 people are standing. Take a stone from right where their feet are. Carry that stone with you to where you camp tonight.

Joshua did as he was told and he told the 12 people who would pick the stones that they will lay them down where they camp and the stones will be a memorial forever.

They camped in Gilgal and Joshua set up the 12 stones saying when your children ask their parents in time to come, “what do these stones mean” Then you will tell them what God has done. When your children look at the stones and hear the stories they will be reminded and they will know of the presence of God. These stones will mark the presence of God.

That is a great story. I’m sure some of you saw the stones of the North Shore in your mind. Maybe you have been to Stonehenge although those would be pretty difficult to carry. This is such a vivid story that any encounters we have had with stones jump to our minds.

I doubt many of you thought of the stones that built Zion Baptist Church here in Minneapolis though did you? Zion Baptist is the oldest African American church in Minneapolis. According to the Zion Baptist History book, Pilgrim Baptist in St. Paul is the oldest African American church in the Twin Cities—well probably the oldest in all of Minnesota.

Slaves formed pilgrim. Reverend Robert T. Hickman, a slave licensed to be a preacher in Missouri escaped along with 50 other slaves through the Underground

Railroad and they wound up at Fort Snelling. They stayed there while the residents of St. Paul decided what to do with them. The authorities divided the group into three groups. The one that stayed in St. Paul included Rev. Hickman and he founded Pilgrim Baptist in 1863. Pilgrim started two mission churches: Zion here in Minneapolis and another one in Hastings, Minnesota. Zion filed for articles of incorporation in 1889 although they had been a church for many years before that.

Zion (if we go by the years they were a mission church) is almost as old or just as old or older than many of the white churches in our city. As seems to be the story with churches in Minneapolis their location has changed several times but their status as a stone, as a living stone has never changed.

The Pastor now, Rev. Brian Herron, Jr., followed his daddy as pastor of Zion. His dad, Rev. Brian Herron, Sr., came to Zion in the 70's. And he brought black liberation theology with him. Black Panthers held meetings at Zion. Pastor Brian remembers how kind the members of the Black Panthers were. They fed people; they worked to drive out the drug dealers and the prostitutes—yeah a little different story than what many of us hear on news reports. Brian's daddy shook up the church, he brushed the cobwebs off of the stones as he helped them remember who they are and where they came from.

There is a rich history at Zion that is different than the rich history here at First Christian. There is a history a Zion that includes being very involved with the Way, involved with the Black Panthers, involved today with Black Lives Matter. There are black churches that over time began to be part of the establishment of the city. Zion has held true to being present wherever there is oppression being living stones—markers that

children can look at and say—oh yeah, Zion was there when we stood up for our rights. Zion has continued to proclaim that the Good News of Jesus Christ includes all people. Pastor Brian was the only one of the older black pastors who went to be a presence of hope and calm during the occupation of the 4<sup>th</sup> precinct after Jamar Clark was killed. Zion is that living stone that keeps reminding people what God has done and what we still need to do with god's help.

The black church was born out of oppression. The black church started as settlement houses so that slaves could get acclimated as they escaped. They also started due to the discrimination they faced at white churches, which were the only churches to begin with.

I wish I could describe the emotions I experienced when Pastor Brian said, “you know slave labor built the white churches back then . . . slave labor laid the stones for those churches. He told us a story of slaves building a balcony on to a sanctuary and then being told that is where they had to sit. And that is all they were allowed to do—forced to accept Jesus as your savior now get to the balcony and no you cannot participate in the life of the church.

It was out of necessity, it was out of oppression, it was out of being forced to be Christian and then excluded from the fullness of life that Jesus offers to all that black churches were formed.

It was the balcony that got me though. I'm pretty sure I have told you about Manny Wright, the custodian at the Presbyterian Church in my hometown, where my mom was the organist. When I was little I would go with my mom as she practiced at the church. As mom played I would go find Manny and help him clean the church. He is the



one who would let me ride on the buffer machine while he buffed the floors. Manny also would take me on a car ride to see his wife who I adored. Remember I shared that I'm not sure if my mom was naive or crazy to let a little white girl ride in a car of a black man and go to the black part of town in the 1960's.

Manny was my friend is all I knew. And he was gifted! He somehow kept that church spotless 24 hours a day 7 days a week. I admired the way he could make the wood work in the sanctuary shine. The brass railings around the choir would sparkle. He took such loving care of that sanctuary.

As I got a little older I would go to the Presbyterian church on Sunday nights because we Disciples did not have a Sunday night service. Presbyterians did and mom had to play the organ for the service. I knew most of the kids since we all went to school together. As we reached youth group age we would sit in the balcony during Sunday night services. We somehow thought we could be noisy up there and no one would notice.

Manny sat up in the balcony. I don't know if he was there for morning services although I'm pretty sure he was but he was always there for the night service. We kids would sit at the front of the balcony and he would sit at the back. I would always invite him to come sit closer to the front of the balcony with us but he always decline and instead sat on the very back row of the balcony. In fact I'm not sure anyone on the floor of the sanctuary could see him including the preacher.

One night the preacher wanted everyone to sit downstairs. All of us in the youth group had already settled in up in the balcony. We didn't move and the preacher insisted to the point my mom was even giving me the eye from the organ.

We got up and I turned around to go to the stairs to go down to the floor I saw Manny sitting in his spot. I said “Come on Manny, we have to go downstairs. Rev. Johnson won’t start the service until we are all downstairs.” Manny said, “I’ll stay right here.” I said “Manny come on I’m serious, Rev. Johnson won’t start the service.” Several of the other youth joined me in telling Manny to come downstairs with us. In all my times with Manny I had never seen him mad until that moment. He looked right at me and he said, “Miss Laurie, I told you no. I’m not going down there. Now get out of here.”

I couldn’t figure out why Manny was so mad at me when I was just trying to get him to do what the rest of us had to do.

This past Monday as we gathered in the home of this old historic black church that has fought for years for equality and justice for people of color—when we gathered with Pastor Brian and Pastor Danny and heard the story of how the black churches started (a story that I knew but to hear the story from Pastor Brian about the balconies) I finally knew after all of these years that Manny wasn’t mad at me that Sunday night. He was scared for his life and he was scared for my life and my friends’ lives. He knew that he wasn’t allowed to sit on the main floor and if I continued to make a big deal about it people would know that he was up in the balcony.

There is privilege to having the same color of skin as the color of supremacy. Privilege of where you get to sit. Privilege of never having to stop and figure out why your black friend won’t do what you want them to do.

Where were the living stones to mark places of justice, hope and the presence of God?

Where were the living stones that children and youth could look at years later and ask—what happened here that was so holy that you marked it with stones?

I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that Manny and his wife Evelyn loved Jesus and they loved God. They were my living stones. It is from Evelyn that I gained my love of good gospel music. Manny shaped my love of church---down to the sparkle of the brass of church railings. The funny thing is Manny touched every part of a church that would not allow him to sit with them.

I looked for Manny on Ancestry Thursday night when I reached a point in this sermon when I realized that this is the story I have to tell. I found him and his wife in a census living on Katie Avenue. According to Google maps the house is still there. I cried when I saw the picture.

I met Manny when I was born. That incident in the balcony happened when I was a sophomore or junior in High School so around 1973-74. According to the census Manny was a janitor at a church in 1940. Due to other directories I found I'm pretty sure he was a janitor at a church in the early 1930's. I remember hearing how Manny had been at the church forever so it goes with little doubt that Manny had been at the church for at least 30 years or more when he was still not allowed to come out of the balcony.

Thirty years of making a place where the presence of God could be made known. Thirty years of making sure that the place where people worshipped God and proclaimed their love of Jesus . . . 30 years of making that place spotless---  
There is my living stone.

I pray that Manny and Evelyn had a church like Zion Baptist to go to when he wasn't at the white church. I pray that he had ministers like Brian Herron senior and

Brian Herron Junior who stood in the waters and understood the importance of being living stones.

And more than ever I have come to realize that we are to be those living stones who stand in the chaos of the water, the waters of indifference as Danny would say. We are to be the living stones that stand in the water with the presence of God and be a part of something new being built. We are to be those markers who our children look at and ask: now what did those people do? How did they show the love of Christ?

## Sermon Four

Agony and Hope  
Jeremiah 31: 15-17

A Voice is heard in Ramah. Rachel is crying, no Rachel is weeping for her children. She refuses to be consoled, she doesn't want to be consoled, and she can't be consoled because her children are no more.

We know this text. Many of us know it because it is in the New Testament in the Gospel of Matthew. We typically hear the text during Advent or sometime around Epiphany. Seldom, rarely, in fact never have I read this text or preached from it on the Sunday after Easter.

Remember in the Gospel of Matthew the Magi had been following the star and they wound up paying Herod a visit because Herod called for them to come see him because he had heard they were looking for the one to be born. Long story short the Magi trick Herod and Herod responds by having all of the children around and in Bethlehem who were 2 years old and younger killed. It is in that text that we hear the words: A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

The birth of the One. The birth of the Jesus. The birth of Christ, the hope of the world and the response is the genocide of children.

We don't like this text during Advent, Christmas, Epiphany and we sure don't want to hear this text the Sunday after Easter.

Remember last week—it was standing room only in here. The music was fantastic, everyone looked great, the worship space was beautiful—still is—but all the

flowers on the Cross—it could take your breath away. We had children upon children upon children . . . we had children upon children upon children. Life was great—we were happy, we were singing, we were laughing. Remember in my newsletter article I said that Holy Week and Easter were so wonderful that fell in love with you all over again. It was that good!

And today here we are and this text that is before us is filled with heartache and agony. Sure there is a word of hope at the end of the text but can we really move past the wailing of Rachel so quickly?

The narrative lectionary text for today is from Luke where a couple of the disciples are walking down the road to Emmaus. This is after the women discover that the tomb is empty. They are headed to Emmaus and they were talking about everything that had happened and a stranger begins to walk along with them and asks them what they are talking about. The disciples share all that has happened and then they say “but we had hoped that he was the one.”

Can’t we feel the pain in those words: But we had hoped. Which means what they had hoped for didn’t happened. There is agony in that.

So maybe this text from Jeremiah works for after Jesus is born and a power consumed ruler kills children because he doesn’t get what he wants. The hope is born and the reality of life brings agony. We get all excited about Christmas and then life returns to normal doesn’t it?

The same is true for the disciples as they walk along the road to Emmaus. It had been an incredible journey following Jesus. We just knew he was the one! We were full

of hope and life. Then he is killed and well, we had hoped but right now all we can feel is the pain and agony of real life.

All we can hear is Rachel crying for her children are no more. All we can feel is the agony and God please let there be hope. That is the thing with the birth and the Cross, agony and hope are all wrapped up together. One Hebrew scripture professor says that: In the shadow of the Cross, we understand the Incarnation as a sign of hope clothed in vulnerability, conflict, and suffering. The Gospel shout is rooted in joy, to be sure! But to be meaningful, it must reflect an understanding of the loss, fear, and pain at the core of human existence.<sup>1</sup>

But we don't want to do that or maybe it is just me. I want to stay with the Alleluias and Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen Indeed! And close my eyes to the violence, the hatred, the loss, fear and pain at the core of human existence. To be human means that we experience life with all of its agony and God help us with all of the hope.

I'm using this text today because it is in the one that Rev. Danny Givens shared with Pastor Tammy and me when we gathered this past Monday. He read this text and then he read Psalm 116 verse 15. The NRSV is "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones." God loves all and even in death we are precious to God.

We heard these two texts as we sat on Larpenteur in Falcon Heights. We heard these words as we sat on Larpenteur in Falcon Heights at the entrance to the most hopeful place in the world (other than church)—the most wonderful, life-giving place in the world—the Minnesota State Fair.

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<sup>1</sup> Carolyn J. Sharp, "Commentary on Jeremiah 31:15-17," Working Preacher, [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2301](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2301).

We were sitting right at the entrance there on Larpenteur—we weren't sitting in the middle of the road—no, we were sitting on the beautiful green grassy land on the side of the road right at that entrance to the most joyful place on earth.

But that spot where we sat isn't a joyful, hope filled place for we were sitting where Philando Divall Castile was killed by a St. Anthony police officer in the evening on Wednesday, July 6, 2016. It is a beautiful stretch of road. I've driven it many times as I am sure many of you have. At least those of us who live in that direction have driven it or if you drive that way to go to the State Fair.

We sat on the ground in the midst of the memorials that have been left for Philando and his family. One of his aprons from the cafeteria at the school where he spent his days making sure the children had good healthy food—one of his aprons is hanging there. There are places to write what you hope for in this world. Sometimes that wailing and cries of Rachel, or in this case Valerie, Philando's mom, is so overwhelming that it is difficult to see any hope.

It is a beautiful spot. Trees, green grass, a nice breeze blowing as one sits and watches the traffic go by. It is a beautiful spot and the whole time we sat there I couldn't make the shooting make sense. And neither can the thousands who have come by the memorial.

There is a permanent memorial that has been placed there. On one side it says: "Philando Divall Castile, July 16, 1983 to July 6, 2016. Son, you never talked much here but you're making a lot of noise now baby! Valerie Castile."

I don't know but it seems that there is a hint of hope of change in those words.



On the other side it says: “I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal, which I hope to live for and achieve. But if needs be it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.” Nelson Mandela.

There it is again that for which we hope knowing that death may be the reality. That same Hebrew professor says that many times we try to “solve” the suffering of the world, in other words make it as if it didn’t even happen. She then says: “only in naming what has riven us and our communities can we proclaim with integrity the restoration that God offers in Christ.” The preached word then becomes a word of power spoken into that liminal moment when agony is true and hope is true.

We know that moment Rachel can’t be consoled but God says there is hope for your future. Yes, Christ has been born. Yes, the children have been murdered but there is hope for God is with us—Emmanuel. Yes, we hoped that Christ was the one but he was murdered and yet there is resurrection.

It is this liminal moment where both agony and hope are true that Pastor Danny pushed Pastor Tammy and me one more time. We were sitting at the gates to pure joy and at the spot where pure despair and agony happened.

We were sitting by the memorial with Philando’s mama’s words right in front of us . . . and Pastor Danny says, “I want you to write Philando’s eulogy.” When he said that to us all of a sudden we were forced to face that Philando was a real person, with a real mama who could not be consoled like Rachel. Philando was somebody’s child, somebody’s friend, and somebody’s lover. Philando was a beautiful black man.

Pastor Tammy and I sat and all I could think is this girl from Mississippi has no right to even try to write the eulogy for a man who was killed because of the color of his skin. I came from that land. All at once the whole agony is true and hope is true moment hit me like a ton of bricks.

And I began to write . . .

And God does not take lightly the deaths of those God loves. Philando Divall Castile was one of God's beloved children. He was created in goodness and grew up surrounded by grace and mercy. He was loved by his family and yes, it is the cries of Valerie his mom that fill this room and our souls.

His friends loved Philando and it is the heartache of their hearts that will last a lifetime. Philando was loved by the children of God—literally—the children of the Montessori School adored him. He brought joy and life to them. He fed not only their bodies but tried to feed them ways to live that would bring wholeness to their lives. Their cries will fill the school halls for years to come.

His girlfriend Diamond, and her little girl loved Philando. The shock, dismay, terror that they experienced was and is life changing and their cries will never end.

At a beautiful spot in the road in Falcon Heights right by the entrance to that Great get together we call the Minnesota State Fair Philando was murdered. Yes, murdered. His life was unjustly and violently taken by a police officer.

At a spot where so many families find joy in August as they go to the fair Philando's family and friends will forever experience death, terror and heartache.

We pray for the day that justice comes for Philando, for his family, for his friends, for the children at school. We pray and God does hear us, as God does not take the death of Philando lightly.

Justice will come and the cries will be heard. God's love for Philando will never end. Continue to love with God's love. Continue to hope, continue to hope for a world where the wailing of mothers will no longer need to be heard.

That is as far as I got in writing a eulogy for a black man who was murdered right where I was sitting. As painful of an exercise as it was, as Pastor Danny said as Pastors we never know when we will get the call to give an eulogy for someone who has died this way. We have to be prepared. The agony is I will more than likely never get that phone call or at least it won't be as many times as my black clergy sister and brothers get that call.

The hope is that maybe somewhere in these words that address that liminal moment where agony is true and hope is true we can all begin to see people as God's children, loved by God, children who are covered in the same grace and mercy that covers us . . . people whom Christ welcomes if they so choose.

The realities of life stink at times because the agony, the heartache, the injustice is real. But there is a board at Philando's memorial that says: I hope . . . I hope . . . even when the agony is more than we can comprehend . . . I hope that God's love wins. I hope that God's mercy is true. I hope that I have a chance to change my heart and a few other hearts when it comes to understanding that there is no one on this earth that is any better than any one else due to skin color.

I hope . . . I hope . . . I hope.

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